

THE
CHRISTIAN MONITOR.

NO. III.

CONTAINING
EIGHT SERMONS
ON THE
MEANS OF RELIGION.

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EIGHT SERMONS

ON THE

QUEST OF RELIGION

— 10 —

BY JAMES H. BROWN, D. D.

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ERRATA.

Page 14, line 10 from top, for *enure*, read *inure*. P. 17, l. 8 from bot. for *accelerate*, read *accelerate*. P. 18, l. 10 from bot. for *christendom*, read *christendom*. P. 26, l. 5 from bot. for *serve*, read *save*. P. 28, l. 11 from top, before *inquiries*, insert *these*. P. 33, l. 9 from bot. for *to*, read *with*. P. 38, l. 10 from top, for *incontestable*, read *incontestable*. P. 40, l. 6 from bot. erase *the*. P. 48, l. 5 from top, for *this*, read *their*. P. 54, l. 8 from top, for *the*, read *theo*. P. 54, l. 21, for *irradicate*, read *eradicate*. P. 68, l. 3 from top, for *ebullitions*, read *ebullitions*. P. 93, l. 7 from top, for *Revelations*, read *Revelation*. P. 118, l. 12 from bot. for *his*, read *she*. P. 122, l. 6 from bot. for *excitement*, read *incitement*. P. 133, l. 8 from bottom for *profess* read *possess*. P. 173, l. 6 from top, for *institutions*, read *instructions*.

¶ Beside the preceding, several minor errors of the press escaped attention, in the hurry of printing: but as they are of a nature to be easily discovered by the attentive eye, and as easily corrected and pardoned, they are not particularly specified.



SERMON I.

PROVERBS ii. 4, 5.

If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasure ; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.

IN every message and command of heaven to men, their improvement and happiness are obviously designed. Pursuant to this design, a plan of redemption was intimated to the first offending pair, and gradually disclosed, during the patriarchal, Mosaick, and prophetick ages, till the “ sun of righteousness arose with healing in his beams ;” and the meridian light of gospel grace burst upon a benighted world. “ When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem

them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." Thus " begotten to a lively hope," we are furnished, at the same time, with ample instructions to form us to virtue and glory. Do we inquire " what we must do to be saved ?" Evangelical faith, repentance, and obedience are defined and enforced, in reply. Would we ascertain how these essential qualifications are to be acquired and increased ? All needful information is given in the various passages of scripture, which prescribe means adapted to the purpose. Of this import are the repeated injunctions to " consider our ways ;" to " be instant in prayer ;" to " keep the sabbath and reverence the sanctuary ;" to hear and read the word ; to " bridle our tongues," with many others that might be mentioned. Of this import are the more general and figurative addresses, which, by allusions to sublunary affairs, exhibit and recommend, in the aggregate, all the methods suggested by reason, or authorized by revelation, to facilitate the choice and pursuit of " the true riches." Such is the manifest intention of the inspired preacher of Israel, when he says, " My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee ; so that thou incline

thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding ; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasure ; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God."

To " understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God," are expressions which need no comment. Like those in the preceding grades of the climax, they evidently denote the spirit and character of true religion. Here then, the spirit and character of true religion are presented to the mind, as objects to be sought and obtained, in a manner perfectly analogous to that, in which we seek and obtain temporal good ; that is, by the diligent use of proper means..

As this discourse is intended to call attention to the subject of religious means at large, and to prepare the way for others more in detail, their nature, tendency, and result may profitably employ our meditations.

1. To any one, who is conversant with the sacred pages, it will be apparent, that two kinds of duties are there enjoined ; and that these duties, though ultimately tending to the same point, are perfectly distinct in their nature and ends. Of the first class, the christian

character is the proximate object ; of the last, the christian inheritance. By confounding these objects together, some are betrayed into an undue estimation of instrumental observances, while others are led to depreciate and decry them, as “ nothing worth.” Now the antidote to both these mistakes is carefully to discriminate between the means of religion, and religion itself. Are you inclined to place the whole of your moral obligations in the “ forms of godliness,” and to imagine, that in them consists a compliance with the terms of salvation ? This discrimination will teach you, that the exercises which they impose, are, at best, but preludes and helps to conversion and sanctification, and can be no further beneficial than they excite devout affections of heart, and induce virtuous habits of life. Do you verge to the opposite extreme, and suspect the means of religion to be useless and criminal, except when resorted to in a believing, penitent frame of mind ? The same discrimination will apprise you, that a believing, penitent frame of mind is the identical attainment to which they are directed ; that to seek it, necessarily involves the idea of present destitution ; and therefore, that this theory inverts the order of nature, as well as the injunction-

of grace, and constructively requires us, not to ask, that we may receive, but to receive, that we may ask ! Driven from this untenable ground, you will perceive, on impartial examination, that attention to means, though it does not include the temper of the gospel, is nevertheless calculated to inspire it ; and, in this view, is a duty, at once incumbent on man, and acceptable to God.

That this is a correct statement of the case, is evident, not only from the contents, but from the very existence,-of the bible. Why is this holy book put into the hands of sinful men, but that by the perusal and contemplation of its interesting instructions, they may be “ born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever ? ” All the doctrines and precepts of inspiration imply the necessity and authorize the use of means. In what other way can we yield a voluntary assent and obedience ? “ How shall we believe in him of whom we have not heard ? and how shall we hear without a preacher ? So then, faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

We are so constituted by the great author of our being, as to be incapable of any attain-

ment whatever, without recourse to means. In every conceivable instance, preparatory steps are to be taken. Needful information is to be gained, native reluctance to be overcome, and efficient motives to be called into action, before we can proceed with alacrity or advantage, in the most common transactions of life. Do we aspire to opulence ? How much arrangement and labour must precede the acquisition ! Nor are intellectual and moral improvements exempt from this general law of our nature. Excepting those only, which are prompted by natural instinct or impetuous passion, the human mind imbibes no dispositions, forms no opinions, and arrives at no conclusions, but by the previous exertion of its powers. Ask the man of science, and he will tell you, that beside the painful and persevering study, which must always be the purchase of increasing knowledge, neither time nor relish for the requisite application can be commanded without constant vigilance, self denial, and resolution. Is religion then, alone to be acquired and practised independent of our personal endeavours ? No : As in secular, so in spiritual concerns, “ whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” In secular concerns, every one feels that activity

and enterprize are indispensable to the accomplishment of his wishes: But spiritual objects, being more abstract and foreign to the senses, are liable to be viewed in a different light, as the immediate gifts of God. This, however, is a distinction no where to be found in the scriptures. They declare that "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above;" nor do they more frequently, or more explicitly ascribe religious attainments to the agency of heaven, than earthly possessions. If, therefore, we discard means in the first case, reason and consistency require us to reject them in the last. But should we not, with one voice, pronounce that man delirious, who would make no exertions to provide for his safety and support, because he reads, "the Lord upholdeth all that fall; raiseth up those that be bowed down; and giveth meat in due season."

The fact is, that the means of religion bear the same relation to their appropriate end, as do the means of worldly prosperity and wealth. This I need not prove; for the differences, which exist among christians on the subject, are rather speculations of the head, than sentiments of the heart. In practice all agree. The awakened sinner, whatever may have

been his theory, scruples not to “ frame his doings to turn unto the Lord.” Convinced of the guilt and danger of his condition ; anxious to escape “ the wrath to come, and obtain the glory and happiness in reversion for the faithful, he would fain “ flee for refuge and lay hold on the hope set before him.” Under these impressions, though as yet the scales have not fallen from his eyes, “ behold he prayeth.” Whilst he asks counsel and assistance from above, he reads, hears, meditates, and converses on the important topick which has seized and absorbed his attention. Nor is he apt to mistake the nature of these exercises. If left to follow the directions of divine truth, unperplexed by metaphysical subtleties, far from conceiving them to be all that “ the Lord his God requireth of him,” or suspecting that they tend only to increase his criminality and wretchedness, he readily assigns them the same rank in regard to religion, which industry holds in the prosecution of earthly blessings. Persuaded by this analogy that constant circumspection and zeal are absolutely necessary to his amendment and salvation, “ he gives all diligence to make his calling and election sure ;” suffers neither the calls of business, nor the avocations of pleasure to turn him

aside ; and with an ardour similar to that, with which silver is sought, and hid treasure explored, “ labours not for the meat that perisheth, but for that meat, which endureth unto everlasting life.”

Should it be objected here, that to be thus desirous of embracing the overtures of mercy is in fact conversion, it is obvious to reply, that this objection is grounded on the supposition, that moral goodness consists exclusively in volition. Were this true, it would follow that every one is precisely as devout and virtuous as he wishes to be ; that good men may arrive at sinless perfection by a simple act of the will ; and consequently that means are useless even to them. But do not good men habitually wish and strive for degrees of holiness far beyond their highest attainments ? If not, why does Paul exclaim, “ O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death ?” What can he mean, when he speaks of “ a law in his members, warring against the law of his mind ;” and affirms, “ to will is present with me, but to perform that which is good I find not.”

There is no person, regenerate or unregenerate, accustomed to observe what passes within himself, who has not sometimes been con-

scious of indulging passions, which he knew at the moment to be sinful, and sincerely wished to banish from his heart; yet found the wish impracticable but by strenuous and repeated struggles. Now to inspire the same convictions relative to every thing inconsistent with our obligations both to God and man; and to stimulate our efforts to "cease to do evil, and learn to do well," the means of religion are graciously designed.

2. This leads us, as proposed in the second place, to consider their tendency.

The human character is commonly, if not invariably, formed by a gradual progress. All antecedent thoughts and actions have an influence on the subsequent disposition and manners. Whatever be the course which we now take, it imperceptibly conciliates the affections, and accommodates the taste and inclination to its demands. Habit is more frequently the cause, than the effect, of deep rooted principle. Unreflecting deviations from the path of rectitude are often known to generate sentiments and views, from which their fondest votaries, before they were hackneyed in the ways of iniquity, would have recoiled with horrour. May we not conclude, by parity of reason, that a constant familiarity with instructions and

examples of piety and virtue is adapted to attach the mind to goodness ? On this ground, an eminent divine of the last century* insists, that the secular arm ought to enforce the observance, and punish the neglect, of the external duties of religion. " For," says he, " though it be true that the sinner, who abstains from vice or immorality, merely out of the fear of temporal punishment, cannot be said to act upon a religious principle in so doing, or to render an acceptable service to God ; yet we must consider not only the immediate influence which punishments have, but the consequences which they are naturally apt to produce. If you keep a sinner from vice through fear at first, it will by degrees grow habitual to him to do well ; his relish for vice will abate ; and by the length of practice, he will come to take pleasure in virtue ; and whenever this change is effected, the man is truly religious : For what is a religious disposition, unless this, to take pleasure in doing well ? This happy change often proceeds from less happy beginnings. We see in children every day that their propensity to some vices is gradually removed by the watchful eye and

* Bishop Sherlock.

hand of a good parent ; and we may observe the same effect in men from like causes."

This opinion has obtained, at least, the practical suffrage of mankind in every age. We accordingly find that all wise and devout householders, from Abraham, the father of the faithful, to our own times, have been solicitous to shield the souls committed to their care, from the contagion of profligate associates and customs ; and to enure them to an early and uniform attendance on the means of religious improvement. We find too, that the laws of every christian country require a visible respect to gospel institutions. If then a reluctant and constrained attention be capable of meliorating the heart and life, how much more efficacious must be the influence of that which is voluntary ; prompted by a desire, however imperfect, to know and do the will of our heavenly father ?

When we would excite any with whom we are connected to a change of conduct, in whatever respect, we consider it an important point, and a favourable omen to obtain a candid hearing. If they will so far dismiss their prepossessions as to listen impartially to the arguments and motives which we offer, and seriously ponder them in their hearts, we enter-

tain hopes of success ; and, in many cases, we fully realize these hopes in the event. Where is the christian, who has never adopted measures of this kind with the view and expectation of reclaiming the negligent and thoughtless from the error of their ways ? On the same principle, to be conversant with the character, word, and ordinances of God, by inducing the habit of reflection and sobriety, tends to superadd a taste and relish for moral excellence. By such exercises the mind is detached from the fleeting interests of the body, and fixed on the momentous concerns of the soul. The circumstances of our being, as "strangers on the earth," and candidates for eternity, are called into view ; and the strongest incentives to "lay up in store for ourselves a good foundation against the time to come," are suggested and pressed home to the heart. Penetrated with a deep sense of our duty and destination, we are convinced of the necessity and advantage of acceptance with God ; and impelled by that instinctive dread of misery and desire of happiness, which are wisely implanted in every human breast, to exert our utmost abilities to be "cleansed from all filthiness of flesh and spirit." These powerful springs of action are

unequivocally addressed and authorized in all the threatenings and promises of inspiration ; and, therefore, however defective, when brought to the test of evangelical perfection, are certainly innocent. Precisely the same motives are designated by the exhortation to seek religion “ as silver and search for her as for hid treasure.” Our Saviour accordingly invites us to “ learn of him,” and asserts the condition of those, who are attentive to his instructions, to be far more hopeful and promising on that account. To the scribe, whose discreet answers evinced the docility of his mind, he declares, “ Thou art not far from the kingdom of God ;” words which can intend nothing less, than that, by his inquiries after truth and duty, he had already made considerable approaches towards the christian character, and obtained a brightening prospect of effectual conversion.

The offending child, who hearkens to the admonitions of an injured parent ; or, in retirement, considers the pernicious effects of his disobedience ; and sensible, not only of the disgrace and misery to which he is exposed, but of the many advantages to be derived from an opposite conduct, endeavours to reason himself into a more submissive and affectionate

frame, does not yet possess the temper, nor perform the duties of filial piety. But does he not take a step which encourages the hope of his reformation, and gives pleasure to all who wish it ? What parent would be dissatisfied with these auspicious beginnings ? Rather let me ask, what parent would neglect to cherish and assist their progress ? “ If ye then being evil know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him ? ” With this divine argument before you, can you suspect that the God of all grace will spurn the returning prodigal from his presence, because he is destitute of that holiness which he implores and seeks ? Can you doubt, a moment, whether he will behold him with an eye of compassion ; and, “ while he is yet a great way off,” reach forth the helping hand to aid and accellerate his approach ? If there be “ joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, who need no repentance,” there must be a disposition in heaven to give energy and effect to measures preparatory to this exercise ; and to adopt and pursue these measures must afford a rational and scriptural ground of trust in divine mercy.

For although it is never to be forgotten, that as in the natural, so in the moral system, all events are subject to the control and government of Jehovah ; and that we are alike indebted to his guardian care and blessing for spiritual and temporal endowments, it is still to be remembered that “ he will yet for this be inquired of to do it for us.” In this way, and in no other, he usually meets and accepts his degenerate offspring.

Whether, therefore, we consider their operation on the springs of human action, or their instrumentality to prepare the minds of men for the reception and improvement of the grace they need, the means of religion obviously lead to a happy result.

III. This result we are, thirdly, to disclose. When we look around on that part of chistendom, which falls within the compass of our observation, what description of persons are most frequently renewed in the spirit of their minds ? Are they the heedless triflers, who seldom spend a thought on the solemn realities of eternity ; who deem it a burden even to hear, much more to read and contemplate moral and religious instruction ? No ; they are the sober and regular attendants on the sacred institutions of the gospel ; who

“ask the way to Zion with their faces thitherward ; watching daily at wisdom’s gates, and waiting at the posts of her doors.”

That men are usually converted from sin to holiness, in this manner, none, I think, will dispute. Some, however, may allege, as exceptions to the general rule, that of those who are equally sedulous in the use of means, “one is taken and another left ;” and that there are cases in which all these “are passed by,” whilst some notorious offender is suddenly arrested in his mad career, and “brought out of darkness, into marvellous light.” But for ought we can tell, the person who wears the aspect of equal solicitude and zeal, may be a mere formalist, confiding in externals for salvation ; or an artful hypocrite, employing them for no better purpose than to gain the confidence and applause of mortals. Whilst the similar conduct of the other may originate in a sincere desire to be “delivered from the corruption that is in the world through lust, and made partaker of a divine nature.” Or perhaps both may be real christians, and the contrast between them consist solely in their different degrees of assurance. So too, the person, who unexpectedly assumes the air and language of religion, may, after all, be an en-

thusiastick pretender, transported by the fervour of animal affections, which will soon subside, and present him again to our view in his former character. Examples of this sort often occur. Admit, nevertheless, that he stands the test, and “brings forth fruits meet for repentance ;” is no account to be given of such a change without supposing it miraculous ? If an indolent man roused by the suffering and want, which he had brought upon himself, were instantly to alter his course, and, by economy and exertion, to rival, or even to surpass his more industrious and opulent neighbours, should we once think of ascribing this alteration to a supernatural interposition of providence in his behalf ? Is it less probable that the abandoned sinner, when truly awakened, may so sensibly feel the guilt and misery of his state, as to be impelled to efforts, which, in concurrence with the established influences of the holy spirit, may greatly accelerate his conversion ? Do we not know by experience, that the length or shortness of the time in which all our attainments are made, depends much, under God, on the ardour with which they are sought. And are we not conscious, that this ardour is always proportionate to the sense we have of their necessity and worth ?

Hence, notwithstanding any appearances to the contrary, the cooperation of heaven may invariably correspond to the respective diligence, of individuals, in quest of "the one thing needful :" Not as a reward of debt, but of grace, free and unmerited grace ; that grace which, according to their different degrees of fidelity and zeal, will assign a more or less brilliant crown to those who are finally found of their judge in peace.

In worldly pursuits we are expressly apprized, that "the race is not always to the swift nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill." But in spiritual concerns, "of a truth God is no respecter of persons. Thus saith the Lord, I said not unto the seed of Jacob, seek ye me in vain." The grounds of this difference are obvious. Temporal disappointments may be needful and conducive to transfer our affections from earth to heaven ; and in this light, though not "joyous, but grievous for the present," may be inflicted in mercy. Yet what reason, comporting with the benevolence and equity of the divine character, can be assigned for rejecting the suit of any who aspires to a "clean heart and a right spirit ?" Other bles-

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sings may be withheld from a kind regard to our ultimate and more durable happiness ; but this is a privation, yea the only privation which transforms existence itself into the greatest of evils, and renders it “ better not to have been born.” On this point, therefore, the scriptures are full and explicit. “ Draw nigh to God, and he shall draw nigh to you.” For as I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn ye, turn ye, from your evil ways, for why will ye die ? Ask, and ye shall receive ; seek, and ye shall find ; knock, and it shall be opened unto you : for every one that asketh receiveth ; and he that seeketh findeth ; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.”

These and other declarations of the same import, are constantly verified in fact. Every one, who has made the experiment can testify, that in proportion to the vigilance and activity with which he has sought to understand and perform his duty, he has been enabled to resist temptation, and go from strength to strength in the practice of religion and virtue.

Were it, however, conceded, that for special reasons, God sometimes reclaims men in

a different way, the concession would not warrant us to conclude ; that means are useless or unsuccessful. A few in every age are permitted to inherit estates, for which they never laboured : shall we therefore deny that “ the diligent hand maketh rich ?” Ask your hearts, or let your daily practice decide. It is still more certain, “ if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasure, that then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.”

In reviewing this subject, we are led,

1. To remark the wisdom and goodness of God in appointing a method for the recovery of apostate man, which is visibly adapted to his condition and capacities, and perfectly analogous to what reason dictates, and experience sanctions in all other cases. Every argument that proves the necessity of vigilance and activity for the advancement of our temporal interests, demonstrates the utility of means in quest of religious improvement ; and every objection which can be brought against the one, lies with equal weight against the other. Is it alleged that faith is the gift of God ? So are all the outward mercies which we seek and enjoy. “ Both riches and honour come of him. It is he that giveth power to get wealth.” Is it

alleged, that nothing that we can perform will render us disciples of Christ, unless the enlightening and sanctifying influences of the holy spirit be afforded us ? Neither will the utmost care and toil, of which we are capable, defend us from the casualties, or insure to us the conveniences of this life, if divine co-operation be withheld. “ Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it : Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.” Is it alleged, that to believe our exertions needful and salutary militates with the doctrine of free grace, and betrays into self confidence ? This goes to prove it criminal to practise industry in pursuit of temporal prosperity. For God is the beneficent author of all our blessings ; and it is not less evidently a crime to refuse him the honour due to his name, on account of his providential goodness, than to withhold that which results from his redeeming love. Are we then to indulge a supine inattention to all our wants, and, without once essaying to procure a supply, to expect miraculous relief from heaven ? “ It is written thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.”

Equally absurd and ungrateful is the plea of inability. For, “ suppose the worst ; that

we are utterly destitute of any supernatural principle, and want that taste by which we should discern and abhor perverse things : yet surely we are capable of some considerations which may be of force to persuade us to the reformation of our lives. If the inward deformity and hateful nature of sin cannot effect us, at least we may be affrighted by the dreadful consequences that attend it. That same selfish principle, which pushes us forward to the pursuit of sinful pleasures, will make us loth to procure them at the rate of everlasting misery. Thus we may encounter self love with its own weapons, and employ one natural inclination for repressing the exorbitances of another.”*

The degree of human depravity is a question, which, however decided, cannot materially affect religious means. Its full extent is certainly known to an omniscient God. The regimen which he has prescribed must, therefore, be practicable in itself, and adapted to the nature of the disease. Can we conceive that he has ordained means, of which it is impossible for us to avail ourselves with effect ; and yet holds us responsible and guilty for their

* Scougal's Life of God in the Soul of Man, p. 69, 70. Phila. Edit.
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* Scougal's Life of God in the Soul of Man, p. 69, 70. Phila. Edit.
NO. 3. C

failure ? The scriptures represent him, as giving talents "to every one according to his several ability," and invariably requiring "according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not." Having sent his son "to seek and save that which was lost," he accommodates his dealings and demands to our fallen state ; and encourages, succeeds, and accepts such feeble efforts for deliverance as our perverted faculties will admit. Without these efforts, we have no just ground of hope. As well might we presume on a plentiful harvest, independent of all care to deposit seed and cherish its growth. If we "hide our talents in the earth," can we expect a miracle to be the recompense of our sloth ? Or will it avail us to plead, that we believed the law giver and Judge of creation "an austere and hard master, reaping where he had not sown, and gathering where he had not strowed "? Let us not harbour a sentiment so derogatory to the adorable majesty of the universe ; but convinced as well of his willingness and power to serve as of the absolute necessity of pardon and sanctification, let us surmount every doubt and discouragement ; and impotent as we are, "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling ;

for it is God that worketh within us to will and to do of his good pleasure.”

2. We infer that the use of religious means is no less innocent and safe, than obligatory. They tend, as we have seen, to call our minds from vanity and vice, and to prepare us for the reception of divine light and aid. Now in all other cases, we scruple not to adopt and pursue the measures which are evidently conducive to useful achievements. Their natural connexion with the end proposed, is justly considered a clear intimation of heaven, that they are lawful and right. Can it then be an aggravation of the sinner’s guilt, to take the only steps, which offer him the prospect of divine forgiveness and favour? To say that he does not take these steps in the exercise of love and devotion to his maker, is but saying, in other words, that he is yet destitute of what he is commanded to seek, which, far from a valid objection, is precisely the reason, which binds him to strive for its attainment. However opposed to the authority and will of God, would he commit an additional crime by inquiring into the grounds of this opposition; by investigating the doctrines and precepts of christianity; by receiving the word with all readiness of mind; and by “search-

ing the scriptures daily whether these things were so ?" For this conduct the ancient Bereans are commended by the sacred historian, as " more noble than those in Thessalonica :" and who does not feel the justice of the commendation ? As rational and accountable agents, what else could they have done with equal innocence and advantage ? In what other way could they have contributed so effectually to their conversion ? The consequence of their attention to means is a sufficient answer to inquiries. "Therefore," as we read in the words immediately following, " therefore many of them believed."*

3. The intrinsick excellence and importance of religion suggest the strongest motives to " go and do likewise. If," said our blessed Lord to the woman of Samaria, " if thou knewst the gift of God, and who it is that saith unto thee, Give me to drink, thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living waters." Could we persuade mankind to realize, " that godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come ;" could we place in a true light the " joy and peace of believing ;" could we communicate proper

sentiments of the support and happiness to be derived from the testimony of an approving conscience, and the anticipation of future glory, none surely would be indifferent to that good part which can never be taken away. All would importunately demand, "what shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" Direct your thoughts then to this interesting subject. Contemplate the inestimable privilege of a restoration to the image and complacency of him, whose "favour is life and, whose loving kindness is better than life." Call to mind that the "world passes away, and the lust thereof, whilst he that doth the will of God abideth forever." Antedate the approaching hour, when you shall stand on the verge of the eternal state; and when the inscription of vanity on every thing below the sun must be read and felt. Convinced that then, at least, it will be the prayer of your heart, "let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his, seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near."

This leads, 4. To remind you of the ample encouragement and assurance of success, with which you are furnished. "God hath a

tender regard to the souls of men, and is infinitely desirous to promote their welfare. He hath condescended to our weakness, and declared with an oath, that he hath no pleasure in our destruction. There is no such thing as despite or envy lodged in the bosom of that ever blessed being, whose name and nature is love. He created us at first, in a happy condition ; and now, when we have fallen from it, he hath laid help upon one that is mighty to save. Did not the son of God come down from the bosom of his father, and pitch his tabernacle among the sons of men, that he might recover and propagate the divine life, and restore the image of God in their souls ? All the mighty works which he performed ; all the sad afflictions which he sustained had this for their scope and design. For this did he labour and toil ; for this did he bleed and die.”* For this too, did he burst the bars of the grave, “ascend on high, lead captivity captive, and receive gifts for men ; yea, for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them. Fear not, therefore ; for they that be with us are more than they that be against us.” Suffer no obstacle, however formidable in human appearance, to dishearten

* Scougal, ut supra, p. 57, 8.

you. “ Every one that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible.” A useful lesson may be learnt from the patience and resolution, with which the perishable possessions of time are pursued. For these, multitudes “ rise up early, sit up late, and eat the bread of carefulness.” No expedient is left untried, which offers aid to the favourite purpose. Is it not unspeakably more important and reasonable to be unwearied in prosecution of that “ inheritance which is incorruptible, undefiled, and fadeth not away ?” Content not yourselves, then, with a languid or partial application to the necessary means. Not only hear, but read the lively oracles of God : not only unite in the devotions of the sanctuary, but perform those also of the family and closet : not only consecrate the holy sabbath to religious meditations and exercises, but habitually guard your hearts, your lips, and your lives : For “ then shall you know, if you follow on to know the Lord.”

The spirit of the gospel is to be cultivated and improved by the same means, which are prescribed for its production : and “ it is with the christian as with the man in trade ; the more he acquires, the more he is enabled to

gain ; every increase is not only a possession but a capacity." Under this impression, " whereto we have attained, let us walk by the same rule ; let us mind the same thing." Far from confiding in any progress already made, let us go on to perfection, and " forgetting the things that are behind, press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

" Wait on the Lord ; be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart ; wait, I say, on the Lord."

SERMON II.

ON RELIGIOUS CONSIDERATION.

PSALM CXIX. 59, 60.

I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies. I made haste and delayed not to keep thy commandments.

THE sacred oracles abound, as well with examples, as instructions, suited to all conditions and characters of men. Not only the distinguished piety and virtue of ancient worthies, but the means by which they were first inspired to a just sense of their duty and destination, and "turned to the wisdom of the just," are recorded "for our learning :" The former to guide and animate the saint in a resolute adherence to the way of truth ; the latter to admonish the sinner of what "the Lord his God requireth of him, and encourage his efforts for deliverance from the dominion and punishment of iniquity.

David, who finally rose to the most eminent holiness, was once under the reigning power of sin ; enslaved by degrading passions, and “ alienated from the life of God.” Emancipated from this deplorable state, with heartfelt gratitude and pleasure, he often reviews the happy change, and for the information and excitement of others, describes the manner in which it was effected. The subject is here introduced by a devout address and petition to the Most High. “ Thou art my portion, O Lord ; I have said that I would keep thy words. I entreated thy favour with my whole heart : be merciful to me according to thy word.” By thus recollecting the consecration of himself to the service of his maker, and the spirit of supplication and filial reliance, which thence ensued, the process by which he was brought to this devout and desirable frame, and led to the correspondent practice, naturally occurred to his remembrance. This process, he recapitulates in the text. “ I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies. I made haste and delayed not to keep thy commandments.”

In this passage are exhibited the exercises of mind which necessarily precede reconciliation to God ; in connexion with their practi-

cal influence on the heart and life. They consist in the great duty of religious consideration ; to which let us first attend ; and then, secondly, remark its salutary effects, in a cheerful and prompt submission to the will of God.

I. Our first attention is called to the duty of religious consideration. "There is a spirit in man, and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth him understanding." However the introduction, and consequent prevalence of sin may have impaired our intellectual and moral powers, we are still free and voluntary agents, capable of distinguishing between good and evil, and responsible for our decisions and actions. In this character we are evidently addressed and treated by the God that made us. All the communications and commands of holy writ pre-suppose a capacity in us, to understand their meaning, discern their propriety, and weigh their importance. And the uniform course of providence inculcates the necessity, and proves the possibility of forethought and arrangement, on our part, in order to the safety, support, and comfort of our earthly existence. In temporal affairs, we are conscious of the power, and convinced of the expediency of vigilance and care. We deem it madness to act without deliberation ; and we feel it to

be no less practicable than prudent to "foresee the evil and hide ourselves." Before we engage in any pursuit of moment, we accordingly attend to its various aspects and relations ; and endeavour to ascertain its probable influence on our leading interests : Whether it be calculated to promote the happiness we desire, or to involve us in the misery we dread ? Whether the advantages it offers be sufficient to counterbalance the inconveniences it may occasion ? Not content with this previous examination, we often pause and review our conduct ; compare its present effects with our former anticipations, and seek to discover its final result.

Now this disposition and practice, transferred from temporal to spiritual concerns, constitutes the important duty in discussion. Nor are any additional faculties necessary to its faithful performance. Endowed with reason, and admonished by every object which meets our eyes, and every enjoyment which gladdens our hearts, it is impossible for us to doubt the being, perfections, and government of God ; or be unapprized of our consequent obligations to know and do his will. Born and educated in a land of gospel light ; and acquainted from "our childhood with the holy scriptures,

which are able to make us wise unto salvation, through faith that is in Christ Jesus," however forgetful, we cannot be ignorant of the doctrines and laws of the new covenant, nor destitute of motives, " by patient continuance in well doing, to seek for glory, and honour, and immortality." The most heedless and secure have general impressions of the excellence and utility of religion. In many cases, these impressions so forcibly urge an investigation of their character and prospects, and inculcate the necessity of a seasonable compliance with the terms of reconciliation, that unless they resist the importunity of their own minds, as well as the suggestions of the word, providence, and spirit of God, they are led to look into the state and temper of their hearts with care, and to bring their life and conversation to the test of divine truth.

Behold then the man who imitates the laudable example of the psalmist, and adopts a measure favourable to his recovery from guilt and misery, to virtue and glory. Roused from the visionary dream of lasting peace and comfort, independent of the approbation and favour of his God, he takes a comprehensive view of the nature, circumstances, and relations of his being ; and diligently inquires to what

end he was born, and for what purpose he came into the world ? He contemplates the heavens and the earth with increased attention, and is penetrated with a sense of the wisdom, power, and benevolence of their glorious author, which he has not been accustomed to feel. He turns his thoughts within ; and, in the curious structure of his body, and the wonderful properties of his soul, recognizes incontestible evidence of his derivation from an infinite intelligence, to whom he is indebted for existence and all its blessings. He recounts the numerous tokens of parental kindness, which he has received from his heavenly father, in the distinguished rank allotted him among the creatures of God ; in the abundant provision made for his subsistence and accommodation ; and in the still more illustrious manifestations of grace and truth for his eternal redemption by Jesus Christ. Convinced by these beneficent arrangements and signal interpositions, that man is formed for more exalted dignity and durable enjoyment than earth can boast, it becomes a question of the first magnitude, whether he have not pursued the shadow to the neglect of the substance, and relied for happiness on possessions and gratifications incapable of yielding it ? He therefore, thinks on his

ways ;" considers with himself, what fruit he has already had, and what he is yet to expect from the course he has taken. Past experience thus called to testify bears witness, that no sensual indulgence, or worldly acquisition has afforded the bliss it promised ; that forbidden pleasures are always empty in participation and disgusting in review ; and that the gains of ungodliness are invariably attended with remorse and foreboding fear. The more he reflects, the more sensibly does he feel, that nothing below the sun is adequate to the desires and capacities of an immortal mind ; and the more clearly does he see, that " the wages of sin is death ;" that beside the pain and sufferings, which it inflicts in this life, and which not unfrequently hasten the hour of dissolution, it entails the most insupportable evils on its deluded votaries beyond the grave.

Under these apprehensions he directs his meditations to the long neglected subject of religion ; and discovers, contrary to all his pre-conceived notions, that the gospel forbids nothing but what is undeniably injurious to himself, or others ; and requires no sacrifice which is not visibly adapted to promote his personal tranquillity, and diffuse joy and satisfaction through the whole circle of his intercourse and

connexions. That gloom and melancholy which he had erroneously associated with the offices of piety and devotion, vanish on a nearer inspection, and these offices appear in their native dignity and loveliness ; as reasonable, and, to the unsophisticated mind, delightful expressions of affection for the character, and trust in the mercy of a wise and bounteous creator. When he ponders the obligations which he owes to his fellow men, instead of militating, as he had hitherto imagined, with the advancement of his worldly prosperity and ease, to be just, charitable and generous is found the most effectual means of securing the friendship, esteem, and patronage of all around him. Even the duties of self denial, in the government of his inordinate lusts and passions, which he once believed totally inconsistent with the enjoyment of life, are seen to be eminently conducive to this purpose. He now remembers, and is surprized at his former blindness to the fact, that whenever he has abstained from excess, and approached nearest to the christian moderation and obedience, he has been most free from inquietude and vexation of spirit.

In addition to the numberless blessings, which flow from the practice of holiness and

virtue in this pilgrimage state, he traces its inseparable connexion with a future and eternal recompence of reward ; and realizes that " all the promises of God in Jesus Christ are yea, and amen." Thus convinced, " that the way of transgressors is hard," and that " godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come," he renounces the absurd, yet prevalent delusion, that the divine commands are grievous ; and admits the fitness, as well as the advantage of allegiance to the lawgiver and judge of creation. Not the danger only, but the vile ingratitude of loving and serving the creature more than the creator, rise to his view, in all their deformity. At the same time the visible and humiliating contrast between his past deportment, and the righteous injunctions of inspiration, effectually convinces him that he has deviated widely from the way of peace ; and not only exposed himself to misery ; but with inexcusable perverseness and insensibility, forgotten the God that made him, and lightly esteemed the rock of his salvation. He, therefore, deeply regrets his former course ; and whilst with unfeigned contrition he confesses and bewails his guilt ; and in the name of him

who is exalted to be a Prince and a Saviour, implores divine forgiveness and aid, he resolves to "break off his sins by righteousness and his iniquities by turning unto the Lord."

Such, in brief, is the duty of religious consideration.

II. We proposed, secondly, to remark its salutary effects, in a cheerful and prompt submission to the will of God. Inherent in our nature is a principle, which impels us studiously to shun whatever we conceive to be hurtful, and ardently to desire and seek its opposite. The wicked are no less solicitous for happiness, than the righteous. Their most criminal pursuits, though egregiously misdirected, are designed and expected by them to issue in this favourite atchievement: And the eagerness, address, and perseverance of their exertions, at once display the power of the motive, by which they are governed, and prove them capable of astonishing vigilance, resolution and self denial, in quest of any thing which they believe conducive to their interest, reputation, or enjoyment. All mankind, however mistaken in their object, uniformly aspire to what they apprehend the greatest good, and labour to be delivered from that which gives them uneasiness and pain. Actuated by this

universal impulse, we often abandon undertakings, in which we have incautiously engaged, and commence a new and different career; and we daily witness in others, changes of character and conduct, which evidently originate in the same cause.

Serious consideration enlists this natural principle into the service of religion, and makes it a potent auxiliary and incentive to christian obedience. The worldling infatuated by the delusive opinion, that the perishable possessions and pleasures of time constitute the most desirable portion of mortals, is precipitated into the chase of vanity: But when he duly considers that instability is inscribed on all sublunary things; and that the only permanent bliss results, from "a conscience void of offence," will he not be constrained to renounce his error, and seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness?" The profligate, hackneyed in the ways of iniquity, and surrounded by dissolute companions, blushes at the imputation of virtue, "makes a mock at sin," and even "glories in his shame." But what are his feelings, when, in the hour of retirement and reflection, conscience sounds that awful alarm, "know thou that for all these things God shall bring thee into judgment?"

Can he soberly contemplate his true character, and yet, callous to the disingenuity of his life, neither dread, nor fly that “everlasting contempt,” to which he is exposed ? The votary of false honour too, who, at every hazard, repels the least affront from a fellow worm ; what must be his emotions, when he sees, in their intrinsick deformity, the numberless indignities which he has habitually offered to the God “in whom he lives, and moves, and has his being ?” Can he still remain indifferent and averse to the reasonable obligations, under which he is laid ? Can he still refuse to make a single effort to “turn from his evil ways ?”

Indeed, what vice can be named, which, if beheld in its real nature and consequences, would not be abhorred and forsaken by its fondest admirers ? Is it intemperance ? Did the drunkard ponder, as he ought, the disgrace and wretchedness, which he entails on himself, his family, and his connexions ; did he recollect the awakening denunciations of heaven against riot and excess, he would literally “cut off his right hand and cast it from him,” sooner than reach it forth to grasp the intoxicating cup ! Is it profaneness ? Were the blasphemous swearer to realize that, beside the pain and horrour with which every sober mind is filled by his impre-

cations, “ the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain,” he would no longer persist in a transgression, for which the most fruitful imagination can neither invent an excuse, nor conceive a temptation ! Is it sensuality ? Were the libertine brought to a proper conviction of the debasing influence of his crimes in this world, and their deplorable termination in the next ; “ that they who live in pleasure are dead while they live ; and that “ whoremongers and adulterers God will judge,” he would surely “ abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.” Is it ambition ? Let the trappings of earthly pomp and splendour be estimated according to their inherent worth ; let the breath of popular applause be weighed in a righteous balance, and contrasted with the approbation of him, whose “ favour is life, and whose loving kindness is better than life ;” and none would be found to “ love the praise of men, more than the praise of God.” Is it covetousness ? After bringing home to his bosom that impressive expostulation, “ what shall it profit a man to gain the whole world, and lose his own soul ?” who would make gold his trust, or seek its accumulation to the detriment of his neighbour ?

But not to multiply particulars, let it suffice to say in general, that when the sinner, of whatever description, clearly sees the error of his ways, and has a just sense of his numerous and aggravated deviations from duty and happiness, the strongest motives urge and facilitate his reformation. It is not to be dissembled however, that the force of custom, combined with surrounding enticements may greatly retard his progress and prolong his conflict. He will find it indispensably necessary to watch the motions and counteract the wiles of his spiritual enemies : Nor can he expect to gain the conquest but by resolute and persevering struggles. In proportion to the length of time, in which they have been masters of the field, and the degree of vassalage to which he is reduced, will be the difficulty of dislodging them. They will not resign their empire without resistance. Though they retreat they will return again to the charge ; and unless repelled with renewed and unabating firmness, will re-establish their tyrannical dominion. Every aventure to his heart must be guarded with the utmost care ; the points of weakness, by which he is most exposed to assault or surprize must be ascertained ; all the means of defence, with which he is furnished must be employed with

assiduous industry ; and the armour of God must be sought to aid the contest and insure the victory.

It is not a transient consideration, or superficial impression, either of the "exceeding sinfulness of sin," or of the celestial beauty of holiness, which impels us to "flee for refuge and lay hold on the hope set before us."

This consideration must be habitual, and this impression must be profound. Transgressors, who "remember this ; show themselves men ; and bring it again to mind," aided by that grace which is sufficient for them, and supported by that strength, which is made perfect in weakness, will persevere in their endeavours ; turn their feet unto the testimonies of the Lord ; and make haste and delay not to keep his commandments."

In this state of mind, such are their views of the character and government of God ; of the mildness and benevolence of all his exactions ; and of the vile ingratitude, as well as unspeakable danger of "living without him in the world," that they dread above all things, a relapse into their former insensibility ; and "take the most earnest heed lest they should again be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." Far from contenting themselves with the vague

resolution of future obedience, it is their first concern to "prove what is that good, acceptable, and perfect will of God." Their vigilance and activity, instead of relaxing, increase with this progress; and, "forgetting the things that are behind, they press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." Aware that they are still in the body, and encompassed by snares; that their warfare is not yet accomplished, nor their triumph complete, they "watch and pray that they enter not into temptation; and walking circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise;" their "path like the shining light, shineth more and more until the perfect day." This was exemplified in the conversion of David: and thousands, since David's time, have been turned from darkness to light, by the same process.

In applying this subject, we are led;

I. To reflect on the mischiefs of inconsideration. This is the prolifick parent of no inconsiderable part of that indifference and aversion to religion which prevails in the world. To the best of men, much more to the dissolute and vicious, the purity and extent of the divine law exhibit a humiliating contrast to their own imperfections and faults. Apprehensive of this, multitudes shrink from the comparison;

and although they would shudder at the thought of rejecting the gospel, and appearing under the banners of infidelity, they "come not to the light, lest their deeds should be reprob'd." Avoiding all self application of the scriptures, they satisfy themselves with such general and indefinite conceptions of their contents, as neither disturb their repose, nor impel them to amendment. In this heedless frame it is easy to foresee, that their inordinate affections and lusts will gain irresistible strength, and "lead them captive of the deceiver at his will." Without feeling that remorse and fear, which, for a time at least, are the inseparable attendants of open apostacy from the faith, they are insensibly decoyed into many, if not all the excesses of absolute unbelief. Exposed, without defence, to every temptation, in countless instances they transgress, without "considering that they do evil." Conscience uninformed of their criminality, sounds not the alarm ; and "they bless themselves and say, we shall have peace, though we walk in the imagination of our hearts."

"Nothing," says a late elegant writer,* "nothing can be more wavering and disjointed

* Doctor M'N. 1805.

ed; than the behaviour of those, who have never been accustomed to commune with themselves. Dissipation is a more frequent cause of their ruin, than determined impiety. It is not so much because they have adopted bad principles, as because they have never attended to principles of any kind, that their lives are so full of incoherence and disorder.” Let it not, however, be supposed, that no atrocious guilt is attached to this heedless course, or that the ignorance and insensibility which mark its progress, can furnish an apology for vice and irreligion. God has endowed us with reason, and by his word, providence, and grace, perpetually invites and urges its exercise: nor can any solid plea be made in excuse for its neglect, or perversion. “ Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the Lord hath spoken. I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib; but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider!”

2. We infer the duty, necessity and advantage of religious consideration. Were you admonished by a friend, of whose sagacity and affection you could have no doubt, that the manner of life in which you had engaged,

was detrimental to your interest, and must ultimately involve you in embarrassment and suffering ; would you not pay so much regard to the kind admonition, as to re-examine your arrangements, and endeavour to ascertain whether you had reason to apprehend the predicted evil ? The bare possibility that you might have adopted measures hostile to your own happiness, would induce you to take this necessary precaution to foresee and avert the impending disaster. " Now God, who knows the end from the beginning," and who has " commended his love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," has assured us, that to continue in a state of alienation from him, is to walk in " the way that leadeth to destruction ;" that unless we embrace and obey the gospel of his Son, " indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish" must be our final portion. Coincident with the declarations of his word, his various allotments, in the government of human affairs, are calculated to engage our attention to the " things which belong to our peace." Mercies and afflictions proceed from the same source, and originate in the same motive. Both are benevolently designed, and both natu-

rally tend to direct our thoughts and desires to God. Take but a superficial survey of your past life, and you will perceive the truth of this remark. You will recollect repeated instances, in which the conduct of heaven has impressed your mind with a deep sense of your moral obligations. At the solemn period, when threatened with the loss of an affectionate friend, a beloved relative, a bosom companion, a darling child ; or, when in dangerous sickness, there seemed " but a step between you and death," you felt your dependance and your peril ; and in the anguish of your soul, poured forth your supplications for deliverance, and with your supplications, your vows of future allegiance to the king of kings. Deliverance was granted to the extent of your wishes, and far beyond your fears. What, then, are the returns which you ought to make ? Can it be innocent to suffer your devout impressions and resolutions to vanish with the calamity which produced them ; to lose even the remembrance of your divine benefactor, and plunge again into the vanities of time and sense ? If you thus requite the Lord for all his benefits ; if you prove thus disobedient to his " heavenly warnings," and faithless to your own engagements, can you hope for the

continuance of his protection in this world, or the enjoyment of his presence in the next? Are you not rather exposed to that awful repulse, "because I have called, and you have refused; I have stretched out my hand, and you have not regarded, I also will laugh at your calamity, and mock when your fear cometh." "Sit down, therefore, and count the cost." Contemplate the nature and circumstances of your being. Look back to the hour of retirement and distress, and recall the sentiments both of time and eternity which you then entertained. These sentiments, however indifferent or averse to them in the day of prosperity, will return with adversity. Nor will they return alone. They will be attended with painful reproaches of conscience, and fearful apprehensions of divine displeasure for past neglects. Be wise now to "understand this, and consider your latter end." Dismiss not the awakening meditation, but yield to its salutary influence; live "as seeing him that is invisible;" and "bring forth fruits meet for repentance."

This, as we are taught 3. is the proper test of the duty now recommended. We may occasionally employ our thoughts on the interest-

ing realities of another life ; we may acquaint ourselves with the theory of christianity, and become zealous advocates for certain tenets ; we may withstand every differing opinion, and contend earnestly for the peculiarities of a favourite creed ; our passions and affections may be often moved ; and we may be ready, not only to dispute but to converse on the logical topicks, whilst as yet we are strangers to “ the plague of our own hearts.” The important inquiry is, not how we speculate, but how we practise ? That consideration on our ways, which the Lord of hosts requires, is inseparably connected with a cheerful and unreserved obedience to his commands. Nothing, which admits delay or exception, is worthy of the name : It is mere hypocrisy and pretence. Have we then inspected the inmost recesses of our souls, and assiduously sought to “ understand our errours ;” to discover and irradicate our most “ secret faults” and darling lusts ? With our personal exertions, have we combined the spirit of that fervent prayer, “ search us, O God, and know our hearts ; try us, and know our thoughts : See if there be any wicked way in us, and lead us in the way everlasting ?” Do the apprehensions, which we habit-

ually cherish, of the intrinsick turpitude of all sin, render us solicitous, in preference of every other achievement, to "glorify God in our bodies and spirits, which are his?" Convinced, that to defer the work, which is given us to do, would betray a thankless insensibility to the greatest and best of beings, and lead to incurable habits of impiety and vice, do we take the divine testimonies for our daily counsellors, and, in all our enterprizes and pursuits, make them "a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path?"

"Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the loving kindness of the Lord."

SERMON III.

ON PRAYER.

JOB xxi. 15.

What profit should we have, if we pray unto him?

“ MUCH every way ;” for all the exercises of mind and habits of life, which the divine law imposes, are obviously adapted to our advantage ; obviously conducive and necessary to our improvement and happiness. Than this truth, few positions can be named, which are more intelligible and evident to all capacities. “ If we be righteous, what do we give unto God, or what receiveth he at our hands ?” For our sake, most assuredly, has he condescended to give us existence, to take on himself the direction of our affairs, and to prescribe rules for the government of our hearts and manners. The possibility of every other motive is excluded. Yet strange to

tell ! not a single duty can be described and enforced, but one or another exerts all his ingenuity to invent excuses for its neglect ; and raise objections either against its fitness, or utility, or both.

Such, though nothing can be more reasonable in itself considered, or more salutary in its operations and effects on the human character, is peculiarly the case with prayer. Urge the many arguments, which evince its importance, and, beside the more trite and insignificant pleas, which carry their own refutation with them, you will be told, that viewing God, as omniscient, unchangeable, infinitely wise and good, there can be little or no foundation for any thing of the kind. If he be omniscient, so they argue, he must know all our wants, without any enumeration of them on our part : If he be unchangeable, no importunities, of which we are capable, will induce him to alter his purpose : If he be infinitely wise, he is certainly the best judge respecting the time and manner of bestowing favour ; and if he be infinitely good, he will, of course, be disposed to administer seasonable relief to his necessitous, dependent creatures. Where then is the propriety of formal

addresses to the Almighty? "And what profit should we have, if we pray unto him?"

Persons, who can thus deliberately oppose the clearest dictates of reason and scripture, are, perhaps, beyond the hope of amendment; and to attempt it might be labour lost. This, however, is not the case with the generality of mankind. Multitudes are rather perplexed, than convinced, by these impious sophists. To them, at least, an essential service may be rendered, by placing the subject in a rational and just point of light.

I propose therefore, first, to make some brief observations, tending to obviate the preceding objections, and illustrate the nature and obligation of prayer: Secondly, to give a summary view of its various advantages: and then, thirdly, to conclude the whole by enforcing its uniform and devout practice, in all its branches.

I. "Prayer is an offering up of our desires to God for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies." It is intended, not to inform him of our necessities; not to persuade him to reverse his determinations; not to dictate the mode, or the period of his interpositions in

our behalf; nor yet to inspire him with sentiments of benevolence and compassion, to which he is now a stranger. It operates on ourselves, and is manifestly adapted to meliorate our disposition and behaviour; to preserve in our bosoms a lively sense of our dependent and guilty state; to excite and increase our "trust in the Lord Jehovah, in whom is everlasting strength;" and "with whom is forgiveness and plenteous redemption;" to call forth our activity and zeal in his service; to render us patient, submissive, and contented under his allotments; and thus to qualify us for the reception and improvement of his mercy.

Such being the end of prayer to God, that he is omniscient; that "he knows what things we have need of, before we ask him;" that he is perfectly acquainted with the inmost recesses of our souls, and always discerns the sincerity with which we call on his name, far from proving an impediment, ought in justice to become a powerful incentive to the practice. To the mind impressed with a due conviction of its own weakness, and consequent need of divine aid and support, how consolatory the idea of approaching an all-sufficient helper, who sees and commiserates our

infirmities, and will not despise the humble aspirations of the broken heart ! Were we reduced to the necessity of soliciting assistance from man, should we not do it with increased alacrity and boldness, if assured, that neither our circumstances, nor our intentions would be misapprehended ? Since, then, we are fully apprized, that no mistake of this sort can be incident to our heavenly father ; since all that is requisite to his acceptance and benediction is integrity of heart ; and since to inspire this is the tendency and aim of prayer, how many and how conclusive are the reasons, which hence result for its constant exercise ?

The same conclusion flows, with equal strength of evidence, from the immutability of God. He has declared the righteous to be objects of his favour ; the wicked of his displeasure ; and never will he " alter the thing which has gone out of his lips." If, therefore, we would enjoy his approbation and blessing, instead of expecting him to recede from his word, and " deny himself," a change must be produced in us. We must imbibe the spirit and display the purity of his children. To accomplish a purpose, at once, so desirable and necessary, nothing can be more conducive than frequent prayer. This serves to

remove from us the iniquities, which “separate between us and our God,” and to generate and cherish those devout affections and virtuous habits, which are always pleasing and acceptable in his sight. This, therefore, is a proper and indispensable mean of acquiring and improving that “holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.”

The importance of prayer is no less demonstratively proved from the divine wisdom and goodness. These, in conjunction, whilst they insure the faithful from every destructive ill, invite the whole race of Adam, in persuasive accents, to “taste and see that God is gracious.” Can a stronger motive to habitual prayer and praise be conceived, than the animating truth, that the beneficent parent of angels and men, not only sees what is best for us, but encourages us to “come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need?” It is true, indeed, that by the benignity of his nature, independent of our wishes, he is inclined to do us good; and will perform what is fit and proper, though we should not request it. We are nevertheless to remember, that it can be neither fit, nor proper, that he

should lavish his favours upon those who "cast off fear and restrain prayer." Fitness and propriety are, in this case, determined by the disposition of the persons who need his protection and bounty : And if they refuse to acknowledge their dependence, and implore his smiles, their perverseness naturally subjects them to his frowns. Like objects secluded from the rays of the sun, not because he ceases to shine in every direction, but because some gross impenetrable substance intervenes, the emanations of divine goodness, which would otherwise spontaneously shed their salutary influence upon them, are obstructed by their sins. The temper of prayer is an essential qualification for the blessing of God ; especially for the renewing and sanctifying influences of his spirit. For this reason, not to excite or increase his willingness to save, "he will be inquired of to do it for us." Hence it appears, notwithstanding the various cavils, which ignorance and vice have framed, that all the attributes of heaven combine to support and enforce the duty, for which we contend. At the same time, the nature and circumstances of our being obviously require its habitual and fervent performance. What clearer dictate of reason can be

imagined, than that creatures, endowed with understanding, and capable of the knowledge, service, and enjoyment of a holy God ; creatures dependent on him for life, and all its comforts ; creatures weakened by infirmity and endangered by temptation ; creatures polluted by sin and exposed to punishment, should daily prostrate themselves at his foot-stool, gratefully recognize his forbearance, and humbly raise their desires to him for pardon, defence, and salvation ?

Add to these considerations the many passages of scripture, in which prayer is expressly commanded, with the various promises and examples of its efficacy, recorded for your encouragement ; and every shadow of doubt will vanish from your minds. In theory, at least, you will concede, that far from an irksome, superstitious, or useless task, to "commit your way to the Lord," and "fill your mouths with arguments" before him, is not only an incumbent and reasonable act of devotion, but an exalted and delightful privilege.

When we contemplate the frailty, imperfection, and guilt, to which we are reduced ; when we recount the variety of sufferings, which threaten our repose ; and when we realize the infinite distance, at which we are

placed from the dread sovereign of the universe, how signal, how undeserved the condescension and grace, which invite us to "come even to his seat!" How cheering the thought, that on all occasions "we have access to the father, through Jesus Christ," the son of his love; may repair to him for consolation and relief; unbosom ourselves in his presence without reserve; and, with a filial confidence, spread our wants, our sorrows, and our fears before him!

II. Do you require additional inducements to a practice, thus visibly adapted to your condition and friendly to your comfort? Take then, as proposed secondly, a summary view of its advantages in the following particulars.

1. To pray for ourselves manifestly tends both to prevent transgression, and facilitate obedience.

The person, who begins and closes every day of his life with a solemn approach to the father and friend of creation, can hardly be destitute of motives, either to withstand the enticements of iniquity, or to persevere in "well doing." His responsibility to "the judge of all the earth" is by this mean engraved on his mind. He is led habitually to feel his own insufficiency, and excited to "stay

himself on the rock of ages." Accordingly, when he is tempted to evil, the idea of omniscient purity, accompanied with numerous and conclusive arguments for resistance, naturally occurs to his thoughts. He advert's to the penitential confessions and ardent supplications, which he has recently made in the presence of his maker, and which he expects soon to repeat. He sees the ingratitude and presumption of rebelling against so powerful, so wise, so holy, and so good a being. He is convinced that remorse and foreboding fear must attend his future addresses at the throne of grace, should he wilfully transgress the divine command. Taught by past experience, that guilt alienates the affections from every moral excellence, and produces aversion to communion and intercourse with heaven, he apprehends the danger of finally losing the disposition, as well as the confidence and benefit of prayer. He therefore repels the intruding temptation ; and with all the ardour of virtuous resolution, exclaims, " How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God ?" Thus shielded from the wiles of the deceiver and his emissaries, he progresses continually in the great work, which is given him to do ;

overcomes one spiritual enemy after another ; and " goes from strength to strength," till he arrives to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

2. To pray for our connexions and friends, serves to purify domestick and social attachments ; and to inspire principles and views, which exalt the ordinary interchange of civility and kindness into religious obedience.

This is a most effectual method of inducing christian forbearance, condescension, and charity, in the treatment of those, with whom we are destined to live and converse. Without it, though we prescribe rules to ourselves, and say to the selfish and angry passions, " hitherto shall ye come, but no further," we may notwithstanding, be transported beyond the bounds of moderation, and involved in the crimes and miseries of unreasonable animosity : With it, religion is made the umpire of our conduct, and the question comes home to our bosoms ; how can we be unjust or censorious to those, whom we are accustomed to commend to the guardian care and grace of God ? The many petitions, in which we have plead for mercy in their behalf, will react upon our own hearts, and, calling into exercise our benevolent sensibilities, furnish

the strongest incentives to that affectionate and conciliating deportment, which, beside its conformity to the gospel of Christ, and the attendant prospect of a future reward, is adapted to engage the confidence and esteem of all within the sphere of its influence. Than this practice, what can more effectually ensure a uniform and faithful discharge of the various duties, which result from the conjugal, parental, filial, fraternal, and other intimate relations of human life. It sanctifies, cements, and endears the union between husband and wife. It encourages and directs parents in the instruction and government of their household. It heightens the gratitude, docility, and submission of children. It excites and aids brethren to "dwell together in unity." That family, whose heads and members bear each other in mind at their secret devotions; and, frequently appearing before God in company, jointly call upon his name for a supply of their individual and collective wants, must, of course, be impressed with a sense of their respective obligations, which will pervade every domestick transaction, alleviate every burden, and increase every joy.

3. To pray for our neighbours and acquaintances, with whom we have occasional dealings and intercourse, checks the ebullitions of envy, emulation and strife, and induces a kind, equitable, and generous deportment toward all around us.

After entering into our closets, or uniting with our families to intercede for the prosperity and happiness of others, in common with our own, can we harbour a propensity to counteract these intercessions, by fraud and injustice ; by taking advantage of the ignorance and necessity of a brother ; or by insidiously undermining his reputation, and opposing his success in the world ? Can the aspect of his superior wealth and splendour prove to us a source of regret, or a motive to hostility ? Can we even wish to rise to opulence and honour at his expense ? No : we shall rejoice in the displays of divine goodness, wherever they appear ; and, though less distinguished ourselves, we shall neither desire nor dare to " fight against God," by robbing the recipients of his bounty, either of the possession or enjoyment of the blessings which he has allotted them. Actuated by that " charity, which is the bond of perfectness, all things, whatsoever we would that men

should do unto us, we shall do even so unto them." The collisions of personal interest and enterprize, instead of unduly irritating our spirits, or provoking our resentment, whilst they render us more importunate for that "wisdom from above, which is profitable to direct," and suggest the propriety of additional petitions in behalf of our rivals, will call forth our unwearied vigilance, activity, and resolution to avoid every injurious design and perpetration, and adhere, with undeviating rectitude, to the dictates of truth and righteousness.

4. To pray for our enemies transforms hatred to benevolence, and revenge to pity.

When our indignation is roused by the discovery and contemplation of unmerited injury, could we prevail on ourselves, instead of "rendering evil for evil," to "commit our cause to the Lord," and implore the influence of his grace to show the offender "the error of his ways," and bring him to the exercise of the christian temper, it would, at least, calm our minds, and guard us against those violent sallies of passion, by which animosity is so often reciprocated, and contending parties ultimately involved in equal guilt and suffering. The presence of an omniscient God would remind us of our own imperfections,

and furnish the most powerful arguments to “ be kind and tender-hearted, forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any, even as Christ forgave us.” Our prayer, like that of David, in similar circumstances, would “ return into our own bosom ;” and fill us, not with the malignant purpose to “ do so to him, as he had done to us,” but with that commiseration and tenderness, which are calculated to soften the asperity, and conciliate the friendship of the most obdurate mind. “ All that envenomed rancour,” says a judicious writer,* “ which is apt to imbitter our spirits against mankind in general, and our enemies in particular, when we suffer, or think we suffer undeservedly, will abate and die away, as we strive to set our affections on things above. Our thoughts, like the waters of the sea when exhaled towards heaven, will lose their offensive bitterness and salt, leave behind them each distasteful quality, and sweeten into an amiable humanity and candour, till they descend in gentle showers of love and kindness upon our fellow creatures.”

5. To pray for our country superadds a christian principle to the exertions of patriotic

ism, and renders our conduct as citizens consistent and virtuous.

Were all civil transactions brought to this test ; were men never to espouse or abet a project connected with the commonweal, till they had retired and “asked counsel of God ;” entreating him to direct their steps, and give an issue to their intentions and actions, favourable to the happiness of the nation, most of the ills, by which kingdoms and states are so often infested, convulsed, and dismembered would disappear. The politician, however mistaken in his theory, would not dare to seek elevation by intrigue and falsehood ; nor consent to sacrifice the publick good to the views of personal interest and aggrandizement. The citizen, though still exposed to error, would distinguish between the furious impulse of party zeal, and a patriotick resolution to assert and defend his rights. He would not, therefore, be led blindfold in the disposal of his suffrage ; but act with deliberation, and weigh the moral, as well as the political, character of rival candidates for office. Looking for a blessing both on his own person, and on the community at large, to the great arbiter of the universe, who “requires truth in the inward parts,” he would be persuaded, in no

instance, to dispense with a reverential respect to the divine authority. His obedience to the laws of the land would be prompted by a religious motive, and he would "be subject not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake." False patriots and infatuated partizans may neglect and despise this duty. The forger brings not his counterfeit coin to the true die. None, however, who is not perverted or enslaved by degrading and criminal passions, can be insensible of its utility. By recalling to remembrance our mutual dependence and obligations ; and by extending our thoughts beyond the present scene, when the petty contests for worldly distinction and emolument shall be no more, and "we must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ," it excites and aids us to "serve our generation by the will of God."

In seasons of publick agitation, when, to use the bold and figurative language of scripture, "all the foundations of the earth are out of course," and a spirit of licentious innovation threatens the destruction of social order and safety, prayer leads the mind to rest on the great sovereign of the universe, who brings light out of darkness, order out of confusion, and good out of evil ; who has wise,

important, and gracious purposes to answer by the most mysterious and alarming events ; and who will assuredly cause " all things to work together for good to them that love him."

Such, in the diversified conditions and relations of life, are the beneficial effects of prayer.

III. What then remains, but that we conclude agreeably to the third division of the subject, by enforcing its uniform and devout practice, in all its branches ?

1. Publick prayer, or that which composes a material part of the weekly services of the sanctuary, is a most solemn and interesting duty. There " the rich and poor meet together," and unitedly address that God, who is " the maker of them all." There we acknowledge the father of our spirits and former of our bodies, in a social capacity ; confess our unworthiness of the least of his mercies ; implore the forgiveness of our sins, and entreat his protection and favour, in behalf of ourselves, our families, our friends, our country, and the whole race of man. Now what can be more reasonable, and, if devoutly performed, what can be more beneficial than this

service? Is it not a just tribute to the adorable majesty of heaven and earth? Is it not adapted to impress our minds with a becoming sense of our relation to him and one another? Is it not essential to the existence and preservation of religion in the world? Yet how frequently is it neglected entirely, or attended with the coldest indifference! "My brethren, these things ought not so to be." Our approaches to God in his house, to be acceptable, must be sincere; to be salutary, must be constant. "Forsake not," therefore, "the assembling yourselves together, as the manner of some is;" nor think it sufficient to appear before the Most High, and place yourselves in the attitude of devotion; but take heed that your hearts be engaged. Consider in whose presence you stand; and let "his dread fall upon you, and his excellency make you afraid." Suffer not your thoughts to wander to the ends of the earth; but hear, and join in every pertinent petition and ascription of praise. This is an offering, which you owe to "the rock of your salvation," as members of a christian community.

2. In your domestick state, many blessings are to be recognized and sought, and many imperfections to be lamented and de-

ployed, which it would be improper to bring into publick view.. Hence the expediency and obligation of family prayer.

“ Upon this point,” to speak in the words of an eminent divine of our own country,* “ we shall have few to oppose us, except those who, from a disinclination to religion itself, and to every expression of it, desire to frame excuses for their neglect. If social worship is ever reasonable, nature itself will lead us to family religion. Who are so adapted to unite together in exercises of devotion, as they who are united together in some very near relation, or in the most intimate bonds of friendship ; one of which we must suppose the case with all, who are of the same family ? These best know each other’s circumstances, cares, and difficulties ; and, therefore, can more properly join in praying with, and for each other. They have many wants, which they may, in a united manner, seek to have supplied. They have many common mercies, which demand their thankful acknowledgments. They are usually affected by the same afflictions, which ought to lead them to God for help and support.

* Dr. Andrew Eliot, late of Boston.

" When we have been carried through the passages of the day, and are met together in our common habitation, that we may again separate for our necessary repose, what can be more fit and decent, than that we should, with one heart and voice, bless God for the favours and protections of the day, humble ourselves for our miscarriages, and implore his care through the silent watches of the night? When, in the morning, we arise from our beds, how natural is it, before we enter on the business of the day, to return our thanks to him, who has protected us in our defenceless hours; to ask the direction, care, and blessing of our heavenly father; and to commit ourselves to his guidance and influence, through the business and temptations of the day."

Awfully alarming are the denunciations of Jehovah, not only " upon the heathen, who know him not;" but " upon the families that call not on his name." Think not then, that you can be innocent or safe, whilst you omit and delay this reasonable duty; but be persuaded to resolve, each one for himself, " as for me and my house we will serve the Lord."

3. As the peculiar situation of every family requires appropriate addresses to heaven,

so the wants and failings of each individual suggest the importance and fitness of secret prayer. "The heart knoweth its own bitterness, and a stranger intermeddleth not with its joy." In many cases our anxieties and hopes are all our own. To utter them before any human being might subject us to the imputation of weakness, or otherwise produce injurious effects. In some cases, to offer up those petitions, which conscience dictates for our dearest connexions, in their presence and hearing, might rather irritate than improve ; and, in all cases, when secluded from every other eye and ear, we "pray to our father, who seeth in secret," we may feel and indulge a freedom, which is unknown, when associated with the smallest number of fellow creatures. Oh ! how enlivening to our happy prospects ! how quieting to our distracted fears ! how soothing to our afflictive sorrows, to leave the world and all its inhabitants behind, and draw near to an almighty friend, who "knows our frame, and remembers that we are dust ;" to pour out our whole souls in his presence ; and to "cast all our cares upon him !"

This, moreover, is the best criterion, by which to prove our sincerity. The person, who spends his solitary moments without once raising his thoughts and desires to God, can neither claim the reputation, nor expect the reward, of true piety. Though he attend, or even make prayers on other occasions, "to be seen of men" may be the motive. But if we accustom ourselves to those retired acts of devotion, "which the world knows not of," there is reason to believe that the "one thing needful" is an object of our serious concern. This, too, is the most useful preparation both for family and publick worship. It fixes the attention, solemnizes the mind, and adds fervour to our joint supplications, in company with those, whom, in retirement, we have previously commended to God. Avail yourselves, therefore, of this powerful incentive to the acquisition and improvement of the christian character. Let its returns be regular and frequent; otherwise it will be neglected and forgotten.

4. There is yet another method of approaching God, usually denominated mental prayer, which no circumstance of time or place need to prevent. The most busy can-

not plead the want of leisure, nor the most diffident the want of ability. Wherever we are, and however occupied, the displays of divine power, wisdom, and goodness call us to adoration, praise, and gratitude. The whole earth is a spacious temple, full of images far better calculated to excite devout sentiments and wishes, than all the exhibitions of sculpture and painting, which have adorned churches. These we may recognize, without obstruction to our secular pursuits ; and in the midst of business and company, may offer up correspondent ejaculations of piety, without the formality of utterance. " For the Lord seeth not as man seeth : Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart." How many, and how great are the benefits to be derived from this practice ! What a security it would prove against the numberless temptations to anger, licentiousness, and excess, to which we are exposed ! And how much more becoming, dignified, and virtuous, when assailed by unexpected danger, insult, or injury, to flee in silent aspirations to the sovereign preserver of men and avenger of wrongs for direction, than, as too often happens, to " speak unadvisedly with our lips," and give indulgence to malignant and

criminal passions? By this mean, we instantly transport ourselves into the conscious presence of an omniscient God, and are led to act and "endure, as seeing him that is invisible."

Say not that you are too degenerate and sinful to pray. That were to plead one crime in excuse for another; and allege, as a warrant for negligence, the very fact which renders it indispensably incumbent upon you to "pray God, if perhaps the thoughts of your hearts may be forgiven you." The gospel gives no encouragement of salvation independent of this condition. "Be careful for nothing, therefore; but in every thing by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."

SERMON IV.

ON THE RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE OF
THE SABBATH.

MARK ii. 27.

The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath.

IT is a fact too often overlooked and forgotten, that all the institutions and commands of the gospel are adapted to our benefit. There are instances, in which even the serious and devout appear to consider a conformity to them, as a service exacted by the Most High, for his own sake. Hence it happens, that some overrate the exertions of obedience, as if, by them, they contributed to augment the essential glory and happiness of their maker; whilst others view and exhibit religion in a garb of melancholy and gloom, interdicting the cheerful enjoyment of life, and imposing perpetual sacrifices to "an austere and hard mas-

ter, reaping where he has not sown, and gathering where he has not strowed." True indeed it is, that when our convenience and gratification come in competition with the will and law of God, and it is not to be dissembled that such cases may occur, it is incumbent on us to "deny ourselves, and take up our cross :" Nor can we deserve the name, or anticipate the reward of disciples, if we refuse. Generally speaking, however, our comfort and our duty are inseparably connected ; and to perform the one is most effectually to promote the other. In the rare and special cases, when they interfere, the mortification to which we are called, without excluding present consolation, is professedly calculated to promote our future welfare. " There is no man, that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting."

The sabbath is an institution peculiarly adapted, as well to mitigate the sufferings and heighten the blessings of this pilgrimage state, as to improve our virtue, and prepare us for immortal bliss beyond the grave. This is more than implied in the text. The pharisees,

who placed a superstitious confidence in externals, had charged the disciples with a crime, because, to satisfy the unavoidable cravings of nature, "they plucked ears of corn on the sabbath day." To obviate this charge, and prove that under the law, to which they appealed, ceremonial observances and positive rites were always esteemed subordinate to the indispensable necessities of life, our saviour alleges that well known passage in David's history, in which we are told, that "when he had need and was an hungered, he went into the house of God, and did eat the shew bread, which it is not lawful to eat but for the priests; and gave also to them that were with him." He then applies the argument by adding, "the sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath." It originated in a benevolent regard to our happiness, and was intended by infinite wisdom and goodness, at once to afford us relaxation from the toils and cares of the world, and to aid our improvement, as rational, moral, and accountable agents. To suppose, therefore, on the one hand, that it "lades men with burdens grievous to be borne;" or, on the other, that it furnishes them with opportunities and pretexts for licentious indulgence, would be alike absurd;

alike inconsistent with the character of its glorious author, and the duty of those, for whose advantage it was ordained.

The correctness of this construction will be illustrated by a brief consideration of the several ends proposed by the sacred writers, in the observation of the sabbath.

I. The first idea, under which the sabbath is represented in scripture, is that of a day appropriated to rest. "Six days shalt thou labour and do all thy work : But the seventh is the sabbath of the Lord thy God ; in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy man servant, nor thy maid servant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates."* This is an establishment full of mercy, if we regard only its temporal influence. Such is the eagerness, with which multitudes desire and seek the emoluments of this sublunary abode, that were these emoluments suffered without interruption, to engross our attention, and call forth our activity, not the indigent and servile only, but the affluent and prosperous would, in many instances, "pursue them to their own death." Do we not find that the worldly minded are seldom, or never, satisfied with

* Exod. xx. 9, 10.

their present acquisitions ? As they climb the summit of fortune, and the prospect extends around them, are not their wishes excited, and their wants multiplied by the successive appearance of objects, unperceived in the vale below ? If then, no regular intervals of relaxation occurred, how many thousands, who are now refreshed by the frequent return of the sabbath, would madly destroy their health, and hasten their dissolution ! To the poor, incessant toil, with all its attendant evils, would become necessary and inevitable. Their reward would be gradually diminished in proportion as the period of practicable service was prolonged ; and they would soon be constrained to bear the fatigue of seven days to procure the same pittance which they now earn in six. The only change in their condition would therefore prove an increase of labour and suffering.

But the benefit of abstaining from the common occupations of life, though more sensibly felt by the laborious, is not confined to any particular class of society. It furnishes a useful respite to all, and serves to recruit and invigorate the spirits for future application and industry. " There cannot be a

more pleasing, or a more consolatory idea presented to the human mind, than that of one universal pause of labour throughout the christian world, at the same moment of time ; diffusing rest, comfort, and peace through a large part of the habitable globe, and affording ease and refreshment not only to our own species, but to the brute creation. Even these are enabled to join in this silent act of adoration, this mute kind of homage to the great Lord of all ; and although they are incapable of any sentiments of religion, yet by this mean they become sharers in the blessings of it. Every man of the least sensibility must feel the beauty and utility of such an institution as this ; and must see, at the same time, the cruelty of invading this most valuable privilege, and breaking in upon that sacred repose, which God himself has given. It was a point in which it highly became the majesty and goodness of heaven itself to interpose :”* And it demands, in return, our undissembled gratitude and obedience. This obedience consists not, however, in mere inaction. We are called to bodily rest, not only to refresh our animal nature, but that our minds, unincumbered by earth born cares

* See Bishop Porteus' sermon on Deut. v. 12.

and pursuits, may be free to explore the works and ways of God.

II. Pursuant to this remark, a second end proposed in the observation of the sabbath is to perpetuate a devout sense and acknowledgment of the wonders of creation. " For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it."*

Here a subject of the highest sublimity and grandeur invites our attention, and calls for our private and publick ascriptions of praise to God. " The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and godhead." Assisted by these manifestations of his glory, we may confirm our convictions of his existence, and rectify and enlarge our apprehensions both of his character and our own. " When," says pious David, " when I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and stars which thou hast ordained, what is man that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man that thou visitest him?"

The splendid appearance, the magnificent arrangement, and the salutary influence of the celestial bodies, connected with the useful vicissitudes and productions of the globe we inhabit, tend to inspire sentiments of the profoundest veneration and love for that almighty, munificent Being, " who stretcheth out the heavens like a curtain, and hangeth the earth upon nothing." Overwhelmed by the numberless displays of his inherent excellence and perfection, we feel ourselves to be " less than nothing, and vanity before him ;" and our wonder and thankfulness are equally excited by the abundant evidence, with which we are furnished of his parental favour and indulgence to our race. When we reflect on the ample provision, which is made for our subsistence and comfort, and realize that the whole system of nature is adapted to our circumstances and wants ; when we contemplate the curious structure of our bodies and the capacious powers of our minds, we are conscious of the relation in which we stand to " the father of spirits," and of our consequent obligations to him and one another. Motives to habitual piety and virtue, which can be derived from no other source, are called into vigorous action.

Is it not, then, a becoming and needful practice frequently to suspend the selfish projects of personal and momentary interest, and direct our thoughts to the beneficent author and rightful sovereign of the universe? Angels and archangels cast down their crowns before the throne, and unite in those seraphick strains, "Worthy art thou, O Lord, to receive glory, and honour, and power: For thou hast created all things; and for thy pleasure they are and were created." And shall man refuse to inquire, "Where is God my maker?" Shall man disregard the return of that holy day, which reminds him of his derivation from the greatest and best of beings, and inculcates the delightful duty of "praising the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works?" To prompt the faithful discharge of this duty is the design and tendency of the sabbath. It was instrumental of preserving the knowledge and worship of the true God among the Israelites; and it is manifestly conducive and efficacious to the same purpose among christians.

III. A third end proposed in the observation of the sabbath is the devout recollection and acknowledgment of an overruling provi-

dence. "Remember that thou wast a servant in Egypt, and that the Lord brought thee out thence with a stretched out arm ; therefore the Lord thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day."*

I am aware that this reason has been generally supposed peculiar to the Jews. Their emancipation from Egyptian bondage was indeed peculiar to them : And so, in the nature of things, most of the special mercies of all other times and places are peculiar to the individuals and nations on whom they are conferred. Yet to receive and enjoy providential blessings, suited to their respective conditions and necessities, is the exclusive privilege of no person or people under the sun. "All eyes wait on God, and he satisfieth the desire of every living thing. His tender mercies are over all his works ;" and "he hath not left himself without witness" to any region of the earth. Beside the common tokens of his love, which are renewed to us every moment, we can easily call to remembrance a variety of signal interpositions in our behalf, both in a personal and social capacity. If, then, the exertion of divine power, for the enlargement

of the chosen tribes, inferred an obligation upon them to "keep the sabbath day," why should not the many benefits and deliverances, with which we are favoured, bind us to a similar practice? We, like them, are frail, imperfect, sinful creatures; prone not only to "forget the God that made us," but "lightly to esteem the rock of our salvation." Amidst the hurry and business of the week, how often do we disregard that invisible hand, which defends us from threatening dangers, and "gives us our meat in due season?" Is it not, therefore, a desirable, as well as a wise and benevolent ordination, that a day, consecrated to religion, should often occur, to arrest our wandering thoughts, and afford us leisure to review the transactions of the intervening period; to trace the footsteps of a kind providence in our preservation and support; and, in the closet, family, and sanctuary, to call upon our souls to "bless the Lord, and forget not all his benefits?"

IV. A fourth end proposed in the observation of the sabbath is the commemoration of the great work of our redemption.

This is a dispensation so interesting in its nature and consequences, that divine wisdom has seen cause to honour it by a change of

holy time from the seventh to the first day of the week ; the day, on which the great “ captain of our salvation” rose from the dead. For this change the apostle to the Hebrews assigns a reason, similar, both in import and expression, to that on which its first institution was grounded. “ There remaineth therefore,” says he, “ a rest,” in the original, a sabbath, “ for the people of God. For he, that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own work, as God did from his.” The christian church has accordingly observed this new era from the beginning. On the very day of the resurrection, the disciples were assembled together to worship : On the next “ first day of the week,” they met again for the same purpose : And on the day of pentecost, which being fifty days after the passover, was also “ the first day of the week, they were all with one accord in one place ;” when “ they were filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance ;” and when “ about three thousand souls were added unto them” by the sermon of Peter. After this the same custom seems to have prevailed among the gentile converts. At Troas “ up-

on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them." That the same day was observed in the Corinthian church, appears from the directions of the apostle relative to a collection for the poor, "on the first day of the week." When St. John wrote the book of Revelations, it had generally obtained the name of "the Lord's day;" and by this name it has been known and distinguished in all succeeding ages.*

This alteration of time, instead of weakening the moral reasons which before existed for a sabbath, not only leaves them in their full strength, but adds a new and weighty motive to its religious observance. Beside the works of creation and providence, that astonishing dispensation of grace in Jesus Christ, by which "life and immortality are brought to light," is presented to our minds. The sabbath has now become a kind of anticipation and pledge of the uninterrupted rest, peace, and joy in reversion for the faithful. While it reminds us of the gratitude and allegiance, which we owe to him who "was delivered for our offences, and arose also for our justifi-

* See two sermons on the sabbath, by the late Dr. Bellap., p. 15, 16.

cation," it guides our thoughts to those "mansions of his Father's house, which he has gone before to prepare ;" where " all that love his appearing," free from the toils and distresses of this sinful state, shall dwell forever at his right hand. It therefore suggests the strongest arguments to " lay up in store for ourselves a good foundation against the time to come ;" and " labour not for the meat that perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life."

But for this benevolent institution, the advantages of the christian revelation had been sensibly diminished. Most men are so deeply immersed in business or pleasure, that they would seldom spend a thought upon their God and Saviour ; seldom recollect their dependence and obligations, were they not brought to a pause by the periodical recurrence of the sabbath. This leads many, who would otherwise continue to " walk in the way of their heart, and in the sight of their eyes," to consider the nature and circumstances of their being, and " live henceforth not unto themselves, but unto him who died for them and rose again."

The sabbath has been sometimes conceived and represented as a mere positive ordi-

pliance, binding indeed on the Jews, but of little consequence to the rest of mankind. This delusion is fully exposed and refuted in the preceding observations. In them it appears,

1. Not as a positive, but as a moral duty.

By a moral duty we mean "that which is in itself rational, and fit to be done, though there were no express command to enjoin it : By a positive duty, that which is observed only because it is commanded, and has no intrinsick goodness to recommend it. The former are commanded because good, the latter are good because commanded. Certain it is, that a convenient portion of our time is due to the service and worship of God by natural right. And could we ourselves, had it been left to us, have set apart less time than God hath done ? The law of nature does not, indeed, dictate to us any particular day, one more than another ;" and this is the only point, in which the precept can be esteemed positive. " We are evidently as much bound to keep a sabbath as the Jews were, though not to the exact circumstances of the day. The equity is the same to us, as it was to them, that we should allow one day in seven to the worship of that God, who so liberally allows us six for our

ordinary affairs. The ease and refreshment of our bodies from the labours of our calling is now as necessary as it was then ; and we are still as much obliged with thankfulness to remember and meditate upon the great mercy of our creation, and preservation, " as they were."* The wonders of redeeming love, which even " the angels desire to look into," and which " many prophets and righteous men desired to see, and saw not," are, to us, an additional inducement and obligation. These alone might be sufficient to attach our hearts to the consecrated hours ; and excite us to welcome their arrival in the rapturous strains of inspiration, " This is the day which the Lord hath made ; we will be glad and rejoice in it."

2. It hence becomes a question of interesting moment to all, In what manner is the sabbath to be sanctified ?

In answer to this question, we shall not contend for that rigorous and absolute rest, which was imposed upon the children of Israel in the wilderness, where they were forbidden even to " kindle a fire in their habitations." To this they themselves appear to

* See Bishop Burnet's sermon on the fourth commandment.

have been no longer subject, than whilst they were fed with manna from heaven. It will be readily conceded, for so the gospel teaches, that they were under a yoke of bondage, from which christians are happily exempt. Our blessed master, as in other respects, so in regard to the sabbath, has taught us, both by word and deed, the extent of that "liberty wherewith he hath made us free. It is lawful to do good on the sabbath day." Acts of necessary beneficence to ourselves, to our fellow beings, and even to the brute creation, may, and ought to be performed. This is evident from the case, with which our text is connected, and from numerous other passages of evangelical history. It is, nevertheless, the indisputable pleasure of our head and king, that, excepting these special exigencies, the common employments of life should be entirely suspended. Such is the language of his invariable practice. Never did he interrupt the rest of the sabbath, but by deeds of mercy and compassion, the immediate performance of which was apparently expedient and proper. No kind of labour, therefore, if we are to "follow his steps," is to be undertaken or accomplished, on this day, which present ne-

cessity does not require ; and to defer till then, what might and ought to be achieved during the week, is to " rob God" of the time and service, which he challenges to himself.

The benefits of this sacred rest are graciously extended to the beasts of the field : It is consequently an additional infringement of its sanctity to commence and prosecute needless journeys, either of business or pleasure. Is this an unseasonable remark ? Are there none, in our times, who, because the law of the land prohibits their ordinary pursuits, as if no higher duties were incumbent upon them, employ the sabbath in making excursive visits ; not always as a mere pastime, but, in many cases, for the sake of transacting worldly concerns ? What mean the "rumbing of wheels," and the "trampling of horses," which so often disturb our publick solemnities ? Do they not, in a voice, like thunder, proclaim the licentiousness of the age in which we live ? Do they not disclose the reason, why so " few come to the feasts of Zion ?"

Every species of dissipation, on the sabbath, is unfriendly to the temporal as well as to the spiritual interests of mankind. Those, who, not content with the rest which reason

and religion prescribe, must be surrounded by heedless companions, and fare more sumptuously than at other times, not unfrequently fall, by swift degrees, into intemperance and excess ; contract an invincible aversion to industrious occupation during the rest of the week ; become habitually profligate and unprincipled in their manners ; and beguile themselves at once of the possession and prospect of all rational enjoyment. I doubt not but many, perhaps most of those licentious, useless mortals, who have learnt to "glory in their shame," and dare to deride every thing serious and sacred, can trace their degradation and wretchedness to this fruitful source of mischief. Nor let it be imagined that any one class of society is exclusively exposed to this danger. Generally speaking, every person, who wantonly violates the sabbath, may, from that moment, date his decline in virtue and reputation, if not in fortune. Should he escape the grosser enormities of vice, it must be the effect, not of principle, but of education. This is a righteous retribution of divine providence : For as the day was designed, as well to promote our bodily comfort, as to aid our progress in piety and good morals, its profanation naturally and justly tends to the destruc-

tion of both. Avoid, therefore, and disown this growing evil. Accustom yourselves to a state of readiness for the return of holy time ; and free as possible from the distractions of the world, devote the day to God. Remember, that abstinence from labour and diversion is required, not only to recruit your strength and spirits for subsequent exertion ; but to give you opportunity to commune with your own hearts, and raise your unineumbered affections and desires from earth to heaven. Waste not the morning in idle slumbers ; but hail its approach with pious alacrity, and improve its hours in those personal and domestic offices of devotion, and in that serious attention to the works and word of God, which shall prepare you, in due time, for an acceptable appearance before him, with the congregation of his people. For we are to recollect,

3. That publick, no less than private exercises of religion are comprised in the acceptable observance of the sabbath.

Man is a social being. Each individual of the species is intimately connected with surrounding brethren ; subject to similar wants, and favoured with similar mercies. This bond of union proves the propriety of joint acknowledgments and supplications to the common fa-

ther of all. Pursuant to this dictate of reason, "Ye shall keep my sabbaths, and reverence my sanctuary," are the combined injunctions of inspiration. The one is exhibited as the obvious result of the other: and so, indeed, it is; for they are naturally associated together in every mind, acquainted with the gospel of Christ. Such has been the prevailing sentiment of christians in all ages of the church. "By this means it comes to pass that many millions of people, in almost every region of the earth, are at the same time engaged in prostrating themselves before the throne of grace, and offering up their sacrifice of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving to the common Lord of all, in whom they live, and move, and have their being.

" There is, in this view of the Lord's day, something so wonderfully awful and magnificent, that one would think it almost impossible for any man to resist the inclination he must find in himself to join in this general assembly of the human race; " to go with the multitude," as the psalmist expresses it, " into the house of God;" and to take part in a solemnity so striking to the imagination, so suitable to the majesty of heaven, so adapted

to the wants, the necessities, the infirmities, the obligations, and the duties of a created and a dependent being." Yet "we see continually, that the most trivial pretences of weather, of indisposition, of business, of company; pretences, which would not be suffered to interfere, one moment, with any favourite pursuit or amusement, are thought reasons of sufficient weight to justify us in slighting the express commands, and deserting the service of our maker and redeemer."*

Instead of falling into this criminal indifference and neglect, let me beseech you habitually to "consider one another to provoke unto love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is." Be "glad, when they say unto you, let us go into the house of the Lord," and "take the most earnest heed to the things which you hear, lest at any time you should let them slip. Dismiss not, when you leave the courts of the Lord, the impressions of seriousness which may have been made upon your minds; nor lose the remembrance of the important truths, to which you have listened. This reminds us,

* See Bishop Porteus' sermon on Exod. v. 12.

4. That the duties of the sabbath do not end with the publick services of the day. Deep reflection should follow, as well as precede our solemn approaches to God. To retire from his presence in a thoughtless frame of levity ; and, as too often happens, plunge immediately into frivolous conversation, dissipating amusement, or worldly business, is a daring affront to his authority, and a fatal obstruction to our improvement. Such persons, “like the man beholding his natural face in a glass, behold themselves, and go their way, and straightway forget what manner of men they were.” This is one of the most common and influential causes of that shameful insensibility to divine things, which so generally prevails among mankind. “The cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choak the word, and they become unfruitful.”

When you seek light and counsel in sublunary concerns, you do not turn from your advisers, and think no more of the subject. You view and review it, in all its different aspects, relations, and dependencies ; and you spare neither time nor pains fully to understand and advantageously to apply it. Pursue the same course, in quest of religious instruction ; employ the retired hours of each successive

sabbath in pondering the lessons you receive, in testing your hearts and lives by the oracles of divine truth, in imploring grace and assistance to see and forsake your errors ; and “ your path, like the shining light, shall shine more and more unto the perfect day.” For “ if thou turn away thy foot from doing thy pleasure on my holy day ; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable ; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words : Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord, and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father ; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”

SERMON V.

ON PUBLICK WORSHIP.

JOHN XX. 24.

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.

AFTER the death of our blessed Lord, it was the uniform practice of his disciples, on the first day of the week, a day which has ever since been held sacred among christians, to meet together, and unite in prayer to God for the direction and aid of his spirit, and consult the scriptures for their mutual instruction and edification. At this time, and for these purposes, they were assembled, when Mary Magdalene brought the welcome tidings of their crucified Master's resurrection, and when Jesus himself made his first appearance to them, with that endearing salutation, " Peace be unto you."

On this occasion Thomas, one of their number, was unhappily absent; and, of course, lost that convincing evidence, with which the rest were furnished, that the despised Galilean, whom he had followed, was indeed the Messiah, and Saviour of the world. Hence, as we are told in the sequel of the story, he continued unbelieving, till his doubts were removed by an instance of condescension and grace, no less undeserved than extraordinary. When he was informed of the fact, instead of giving credence to the information, he pertinaciously replied, “ Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.” Had not the compassionate Redeemer seen fit to comply with this extravagant demand; at least, had he not deigned, by some incontestible proof, to demonstrate the identity of his person, and the consequent divinity of his mission and religion, Thomas had, in all human probability, “ made shipwreck of faith and a good conscience.”

From the words thus briefly exhibited in their connexions, we may remark, first, the duty of assembling for social and publick worship; and, secondly, the danger of neglecting,

In contrast with the advantage of improving; the seasons appropriated to this service: Whence, thirdly, will result the most powerful motives to a constant and conscientious attendance at the sanctuary.

I. We are, first, to remark the duty of assembling for social and publick worship.

This practice is not only authorized, but recommended and enforced by the apostolick example, to which the text alludes; and which is repeatedly mentioned in other parts of the gospel history. Customs which prevailed in the early ages of the church, before christianity was corrupted by the superstitious inventions and traditions of men, are generally and justly considered as inferring an obligation upon us to "go, and do likewise." Certainly then, those customs, which were adopted by the immediate companions of Christ, by those, who enjoyed the privilege of his personal presence and counsel, and who could not be ignorant of the rules and orders of his kingdom, deserve our unreserved and cheerful adoption. Had we no other authority than the religious convocations of the primitive disciples, on this ground alone we might safely rest the propriety and obligation of christian worship. This, however, is not our only

warrant. To place the duty in a still more clear and convincing light, and to obviate every possible objection, numerous exhortations and injunctions are found in the sacred pages, which speak a language exactly coincident with this ancient usage. "Let us consider one another," says the apostle to the Hebrews, "to provoke unto love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is." To multiply quotations of this import would be easy, but needless. Open your bibles, and peruse their inspired contents, and you cannot overlook them.

The practice contended for has the sanction of reason, as well as of revelation. Publick offices of religion are not peculiar to the christian economy. All ages and nations of men have had their forms of external worship and adoration, which, however erroneous, in themselves considered, prove, at least, that the principle is founded in nature. The gospel corrects these errors, and carries this natural principle into its just conclusions. Here we are taught, that "the hour is now come, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth." Here, too,

we are informed “ wherewith to come before the Lord, and bow ourselves before the most high God.” We are not, like the heathen, to imagine the solemn exercises, to which we are called, an equivalent for the blessings we need and seek ; for “ we cannot be profitable to the Almighty, as he that is wise may be profitable to himself and his neighbour.” Exalted above all praise, our sublimest anthems can never describe, much less increase his essential glory. To “ tread his courts,” and gratefully recognize his being, perfections, and government ; to magnify the riches of his goodness with the congregation of his people ; to hear the messages of his grace ; and jointly to implore his forgiveness and favour, though expressions of homage, submission, and dependence, every way becoming our condition, are nevertheless calculated solely for our benefit ; and tend, by the benevolent ordination of heaven to our improvement and salvation. To omit them, therefore, is at once to betray a thankless indifference to the parent and benefactor of creation, and expose ourselves to the perpetual dominion and punishment of sin.

II. We hence proceed, secondly, to remark the danger of neglecting, in contrast

with the advantage of improving the seasons appropriated to social and publick worship.

This danger is strikingly displayed in the case of Thomas. He was not with the other disciples, when Jesus came. Whilst, therefore, by the sight of their risen Lord, they, who had before been equally diffident and desponding, were established in the faith ; for want of this evidence and support, which, but for his own neglect, had been vouchsafed to him at the same time, he was left still a prey to gloomy uncertainty, and perplexing doubt.

Here is exhibited, in a manner well adapted to rouse our attention and enkindle our zeal, the risk we run by relaxing our diligence, in the use of those means, which divine wisdom and goodness have prescribed to aid our progress in piety and virtue. For although we discard the reveries of enthusiastick pretenders, who boast of supernatural visions and revelations, and arrogantly condemn all who do not profess some mysterious intercourse with heaven, through the medium of their bodily senses ; yet, that by the worship and ordinances of the gospel, the Holy Ghost renews the heart, and sanctifies the will and affections, is a rational, consistent, and scriptural assertion.

This is the ordinary and stated method, in which the benefits of redemption are communicated, the new man formed, and the divine life sustained. Independent of this method, it is presumption to expect the forgiveness and acceptance of our maker. Even those, who are necessarily detained from the house of prayer and its attendant privileges, are deprived of many comforts and helps, which they might otherwise enjoy. Such detention is, therefore, deprecated by every considerate and serious mind, as a grievous frown of providence. How deplorable, then, must be the moral state of those, who pay no regard to the returning periods of worship, but suffer them to pass unnoticed and unimproved ! Though apprized of the way, in which God is wont to meet and bless his degenerate offspring, " they will not even frame their doings to turn unto him." In the exercise of this temper, what prospect can they have of converting grace ? Will the lawgiver and judge of the world reward their ingratitude and sloth with a miraculous interposition for their deliverance from " the wrath to come ?" Will he forcibly intrude his mercy upon them, whilst they turn a deaf ear to the calls and counsels of his love ?

Would they consent to "wait at wisdom's gates," and "ask the way to Zion, with their faces thitherward," they might hope for every needful assistance to encourage and accelerate their progress. But since, instead of adopting this rational and prudent course, they slight and disregard those "glad tidings of great joy," which attune the voices of angels to praise ; "forget the God that made them, and lightly esteem the rock of their salvation," may they not justly be "given over to a reprobate mind ;" and left, "after their hardness and impenitent heart, to treasure up wrath against the day of wrath, and revelation of the righteous judgment of God ?"

Here some, "willing to justify themselves," may inquire, 'To what extent would the preacher carry his ideas upon this subject ? Would he be understood to intimate, that it is dangerous ever to absent ourselves from the sanctuary, when we could attend without material inconvenience ? "Thus saying, he reproaches us also." For though we readily grant, that those, who rarely or never appear before the Lord, in his earthly temple, are without excuse, and imminently exposed to incurable impenitence and unbelief ; yet we cannot conceive ourselves in equal, or

‘even similar hazard, merely because we occasionally spend the whole, or a part of the sabbath, without joining in the publick solemnities of the day.’

In answer to this popular plea, let the perilous situation, into which Thomas was thrown, by a single instance of neglect, again speak and be heard. How much of the meek and docile spirit of christianity he apparently forfeited ! How bold and unreasonable the scruples, which he imbibed and expressed ! How presumptuous and arrogant the tone, in which he prescribed the kind of evidence, without which he would not believe ! Happy for him, his delinquency did not grow into a settled habit. At their next convocation, he was present with his brethren ; when, not for his sake alone, but for reasons which no longer exist ; to demonstrate to all succeeding generations a fundamental article of our holy religion, the exacted proof was given.

But can you be certain of surmounting the dangers, which threatened his destruction, if you needlessly and frequently fall into the same error? Is it not more than possible, that from these small beginnings, you may gradually advance to sceptical opinions and

conversation, and ultimately contract an unconquerable dislike and aversion to every species of religious observance ? This, to say no more, is the ordinary process of apostacy from the faith ; and has been repeatedly exemplified before our eyes. Among those, who ridicule every expression and appearance of devotion, how often do we find men, who once revered the name and worship of God, and, of course, supported a respectable and useful character ; men, whose degeneracy visibly commenced with their inattention to the sacred institutions of the gospel. For want of that culture, which reason and scripture enjoin, they imperceptibly lost their tenderness of conscience, and convictions of truth and duty ; and learnt, not the language only, but the sentiments and crimes of infidelity. The excesses of unbelief, like noxious weeds in the uncultivated soil, spontaneously arise in the heart, and obstruct the growth of every virtuous principle, when the offices of piety are suspended.

Suppose the best, however ; that you should be able to stop short of this deplorable result ; and, like Thomas, finally to retain your integrity. Will you, therefore, suffer no disadvantage by your occasional negligence ? On the day when, in compliance with an indo-

lent humour, or for the sake of receiving or paying a friendly visit, falsely so called, you shall absent yourselves, the publick services may be so peculiarly adapted to your circumstances, that were you present, your attention would be arrested, and your hearts and lives improved. Another opportunity, equally favourable, on all accounts, to the purpose, may never occur. For it is an undoubted fact, that a prayer, a sermon, or a small portion of either, rendered impressive by some attending incident of manner or occasion, may take deeper root in the mind, and produce more lasting and salutary fruits in the life, than volumes, in a different situation. In private, you may read devout discourses and exercises far more correct and pathetick, and yet continue unmoved and indifferent.

There is a solemnity in publick acts of devotion and worship, admirably calculated to meliorate the temper and manners. Our united acknowledgments of the existence and attributes of Jehovah, joined with our confessions of guilt and dependence, and our supplications for pardon and support, naturally tend to inspire and diffuse a spirit of undissembled piety and benevolence. Whilst we approach the throne of divine grace, as the children of

one common father, who, regardless of all earthly distinctions, "looketh on the heart ;" and whilst we hearken to the parental addresses of his word, which proclaims the overtures of his mercy to our fallen race ; and, at once beseeches us "in Christ's stead to be reconciled unto God," and warns us of that "indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, which are revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness and ungodliness of men ;" what but the most perverse insensibility can steel our hearts to that love of God and our neighbour, which "is the fulfilling of the law ?" Can a more obvious, a more direct method be conceived for the production and increase of that reverence for his character, and attachment to the service of our maker ; that humility and meekness, justice and charity, condescension and forbearance, in our social intercourse, which are alike indispensable to our present peace and future glory ?

Of those, who stately adopt this instituted method, "there are none, perhaps, who receive not, at least, some temporary impressions of religion, which, though they work not their entire and full effect ; though they be soon choaked by the cares and pleasures of

the world, yet keep those cares and pleasures at a stand, and prevent them from swallowing up the soul in a total degeneracy. Others there are, no doubt, who, by their appearance here, are happily surprised into a sense of piety and religion ; whose callous hearts are softened, and prepared for the impressions of divine grace, by the solemnity of publick worship ; who came deaf to every call but that of decency and custom, but depart with a better sense of things on their minds, roused from their lethargy of soul, to listen to the warning voice, which bids them return to the right way, and walk in it.

“ There is that strong and mutual connexion between the body and the soul, between the senses and imagination, the passions and the reason of mankind, that they uniformly act and re-act upon each other ; and, by this mutual rebound, work effects, which, to a common eye, may seem almost miraculous. Is it not a general and just complaint, that the mind of man is drawn forcibly down from the contemplation of divine things, by the allurements of the outward senses ? What lessons of morality have been given on this important topick ? How often, and how powerfully have

mankind been exhorted to avoid every inviting temptation of sight and hearing ; because these, working on the imagination and passions, do inevitably sink the soul into every sensual excess ? Now so it hath happened, that many of these pious moralists, not penetrating into the full extent of the human frame, have branded the senses and imagination, as the natural enemies of all virtue ; forgetting, that by a proper application, they might be enlisted in her service, and happily converted into natural instruments of the noblest purposes of religion. For as many objects of sense tend to debase the mind, so there are others which no less tend to exalt it. Hence indifferent things gain their efficacy ; for as the soul, in common life, is too generally drawn down by earthly objects, so it is the province of publick religion to counterwork their operations, and elevate the mind to the contemplation of divine things, by external and solemn institutions. Thus the appointed times of worship will naturally put us in mind of the work to which we are called : The awful silence and solemnity of the house of God will naturally awaken those impressions of love and gratitude, those sentiments of humility and

submission, which are the proper foundations of unfeigned devotion.

“ Beside these great effects, we must not forget the powerful influence of example, in the publick worship of God. . . By example I mean not only that which works by shame or emulation, nor that” exclusively, “ which awakens cool reflection in the mind, by both which religion and piety are indeed often promoted ; but I mean that sympathy of soul so strongly prevalent in human nature, which, like fire among combustible matter, immediately runs through the mass, converting the whole to its own likeness. The passions are contagious. Fear, hope, grief, joy, exultation and rapture, shining forth in the countenance of our fellow creatures, strike themselves into our hearts, and awaken corresponding feelings in the soul. Thus the sight of a congregation seriously united in worship, naturally inspires additional degrees of piety and reverence. Every individual at once gives and receives new fervours of devotion ; a devotion far more animated than can easily be raised in the retirement of the closet. We become more ardent in prayer, more attentive in hearing ; and when,” aided by “ the powers of harmony,” we speak forth the divine praise,

" our hearts are doubly warmed with gratitude, and then indeed do we worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

" Though each of these effects, when separately considered, is of great weight ; yet when united, they receive still higher degrees of usefulness and efficacy, especially when enforced by the power of custom. Those places, actions, ceremonies, postures, forms of worship, to which we have been long accustomed, and to which we have habitually joined the ideas of reverence, piety, sanctity, gratitude, and devotion, will always affect us in the most warm and effectual manner."*

To these advantages, the hope of which is authorized by the nature and tendency of social worship, may be added the animating prospect of a divine blessing, with which it is accompanied, as an institution of revealed religion. Since " the Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob," will he not afford his special presence and gracious co-operation to those, who devoutly frequent the place where his name is recorded ? The means, which his wisdom and goodness

* See a sermon by John Brown, A. M. delivered at the dedication of St. James's Church in Whitehaven (England) 1753.

have appointed, his power will prosper. Great and precious are the promises of the gospel on this subject. The constituted, "Head over all things to the church" has declared, that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." He has not only assured his faithful ministers, that "he is with them alway even to the end of the world;" but to the smallest number of worshippers, "who shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask," he has engaged "it shall be done for them of his Father, who is in heaven. For," says he, "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

If, therefore, we assiduously wait on God in the way of his own appointment, we have abundant reason to expect his concurrence and aid to "help our infirmities," and "guide us in the way everlasting :" But if we "set at naught his counsel, and will none of his reproof ;" if we needlessly turn aside from his house and worship, we madly expose ourselves to be "hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."

III. Whence, thirdly, the most powerful motives to a constant and conscientious attendance at the sanctuary arise to view.

To discover these motives, you need only to recollect and realize the interesting truths, that have been dispensed. You have seen that the practice recommended is a matter of duty. Its obligation results from the condition and relations of our being, and is founded in the reason and nature of things. The God, from whom we derived our existence, to whom we are indebted for all our blessings, and at whose dread tribunal we must give an account for all our conduct, " requires this at our hands," not barely as a token of homage and reverence to him; but as a mean of bringing us to a resemblance of his moral image and law, and to a meetness for his eternal kingdom.

Were we sinless as angels, it would still be incumbent upon us, unitedly to " praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men." Far, however, from this is our real character. We are frail, imperfect, guilty creatures. We all need repeated instruction, admonition, and enticement, relative to " the things which belong to our peace ;" and whoever imagines himself an exception from the rest of mankind, and capable of maintaining " a conscience void of offence," independent of those

external aids, which are required in the volume of inspiration, "deceives his own heart." No man is either so well informed, or so virtuously disposed, but he may derive additional improvement from the publick offices of religion. How great and extensive soever may be his attainments without them ; with them, these attainments would be yet more distinguished. Though he be literally wiser "than all his teachers," his mind may, notwithstanding, be "stirred up by way of remembrance," and directed to important, practical subjects, which might otherwise escape his notice, and fail of their proper fruits in his life and conversation. Meanwhile, he may both receive and communicate a more fervent piety and zeal, by associating with others in the solemn acts of devotion and worship. This being the design and tendency of the institution, in proportion to his rank and influence in society, he may, and he is bound in duty to give a sanction to the things that are excellent, at the same time that he promotes and accelerates his personal growth in grace.

If, therefore, you would not incur the imputation of inexcusable ingratitude to the glorious author and benefactor of your lives ; if you would not betray a criminal indifference

to the dignity, perfection, and happiness, for which you were formed ; if you would avoid the aggravated guilt and condemnation of slighting offered mercy, and " rejecting the counsel of God against yourselves ;" if you would not become abettors and " partakers of other men's sins," you lack no inducement to an habitual, sincere, and exemplary obedience in this particular.

You all wish to secure and enjoy the benefits of redemption. There is none, but, in the hour of retirement and reflection, is constrained, with Balaam of old, to exclaim, " Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his." Learn, then, to prize and improve the means, which, for this purpose, " a faithful creator" has ordained. Recollect, that, in the diligent use of these means, the virtues and graces of the christian character, and a consequent title to " inheritance among them that are sanctified," are to be sought and obtained. Whilst you rejoice in that divine and animating proclamation, " If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasure, then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God," guard against a faulty negligence and sloth, by taking into serious and frequent considera-

tion the advantage of improving, and the danger of neglecting seasons consecrated to the special service of God, and favourable to the choice and pursuit of "that good part which can never be taken away from you."

When indisposed to the publick exercises of religion, and tempted to refrain your foot from the courts of the Lord, pause first, and let meditations of the following import take possession of your heart: 'I am on probation for an endless eternity; in which, "according to the deeds done in the body," ineffable joy, or inconceivable wo must be my portion! and, "behold now is the acceptable time, behold now is the day of salvation." This may be the last sabbath I shall ever enjoy. Before the arrival of another, my fate may be unalterably fixed in the region of unbodied spirits; and I may wish in vain "to see one of the days of the son of man." But if not, who knows but a word in season is now prepared; of the saving benefit of which an unnecessary absence might forever deprive me? And how, O how could I endure the august scene of the final judgment, should it then appear, that when no insurmountable obstacle made it impractical

‘ ble, or even difficult, by refusing to “ seek
‘ the Lord, while he might be found,” and to
‘ “ call upon him while he was near,” I had
‘ perversely forfeited an unfading crown of
‘ righteousness, and subjected myself to the
‘ awful destiny of “ hypocrites and unbe-
‘ lievers ?”

Under these impressions, how absurd and guilty would the usual pleas for delinquency be found ! Were they duly contemplated and cherished, neither idleness nor amusement, neither business nor pleasure, would seduce you from the worship and ordinances of the gospel. Instead of forming excuses, or exclaiming, “ What a weariness is it ?” you would “ be glad when they said unto you, let us go into the house of the Lord ;” and, “ more ready to hear than to offer the sacrifice of fools,” you would “ go from strength to strength,” till by the services of the earthly, you should be qualified for the sublimer occupations and enjoyments of the heavenly Zion.

“ Consider what has been said, and the Lord give you understanding in all things, and make you perfect in every good work to do his will : working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ ; to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

SERMON VI.

ON HEARING THE WORD.

JAMES i. 21.

Wherefore, lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the ingrafted word, which is able to save your souls.

THE blessed Jesus, "having loved his own, loved them to the end." Constituted "head over all things to the church," he not only spent, but sacrificed his life for the human kind. Nor did the effects of his benevolence terminate with the period of his ministry and sufferings on earth. He made permanent provision for the instruction, admonition, and encouragement of his followers in future ages. "When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men; some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the

saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." Knowing our frame, and pitying our infirmities, he commissioned an order of men to explain and inculcate the principles of that "new and living way, which he had consecrated for us ;" and frequently to call the attention of their brethren from the ensnaring objects, pursuits, and pleasures of time to the "one thing needful."

This is the origin and end of preaching ; which has long and justly been reputed an efficacious mean of disseminating the knowledge, and exciting the practice of pure and undefiled religion. Hence the importance of an impartial and constant attendance on the publick ministrations of the gospel. That such attendance is designed in the exhortation to "receive with meekness the ingrafted word," none, who observes the connexion in which it stands, will dispute. It is an expressive metaphor, taken from a well known practice in agriculture ; and requiring us to admit and cherish the truths dispensed from the oracles of God, as the germe of that "fruit unto holiness, the end of which is everlasting life."

We are taught then, first, the duty of hearing the word ; secondly, the temper of

mind, in which this duty is to be performed ; and thirdly, its tendency to our improvement and salvation.

I. The apostle evidently supposes it previously understood and conceded, that all are bound to hear the word. Instead, therefore, of formally recommending the act, he gives directions for the faithful performance of the duty ; and speaks in a style, which indicates a special reference to the practice of attending to the great truths of inspiration, as stately dispensed in christian assemblies. The obligations to this practice appear,

1. From its divine institution. To any one, who but superficially surveys the history of our Saviour's life, it will be obvious, that he early sent forth persons ordained to that office, to preach the gospel of the kingdom.* That this was not a mere temporary expedient, adopted to introduce and give publicity to a new and unknown religion ; but an arrangement designed to continue and operate through all succeeding time, is proved by the extent of the commission and promise, which he gave to his primitive ministers, after his resurrection from the dead : † “ Go ye,

* See Math. x. 1. and Luke x. 1.

† Math. xxviii. 19, 20.

therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you : And, lo, I am with you alway, even to the end of the world." The same position is additionally confirmed by the subsequent conduct of the apostles. One of their first official transactions, after the ascension of their master, was to fill the vacancy, occasioned by the apostacy of Judas Iscariot ;* and, during life, they "ordained elders in every church"† that was planted ; directing these elders, in their turn, to "commit the same trust to faithful men, who should be able to teach others also."‡

By these means, a succession of publick teachers has been preserved, and the christian ministry may be traced to the express appointment and command of Christ. In this view, it unquestionably merits profound regard. If "the author and finisher of our faith" have required some to preach, it is, of course, incumbent on others to hear ; and gratitude, as well as deference to him, who "died that we

* See Acts i. 16. ad fin.

‡ 1 Tim. ii. 2.

† Ibid. xiv. 23.

might live," should prompt a cheerful compliance with the intimations of his will.

But 2. The duty of hearing the word rests not solely on the divine authority: It is both requisite and profitable for instruction.

A large proportion of our species have occasion for "some man to guide them," in their moral and religious concerns. Not to insist on the case of the young and inexperienced; nor yet of those in riper age, whose advantages and capacity for improvement are circumscribed within narrow limits, and who confessedly "need one to teach them which be the first principles of the oracles of God;" many of the intelligent and discerning are so constantly occupied by other cares and pursuits, as to have little time, and, perhaps, less inclination for theological inquiries. Though well informed in secular affairs, they may still be untaught in spiritual wisdom: For it is a fact, equally notorious and melancholy, that religion rarely, if ever, holds that rank among the objects of education, which its importance demands. In many instances it is totally neglected. May not persons, in this situation, be instructed from the pulpit? To them, at least, it is an invaluable privilege, to have fre-

quent opportunities of hearing the scriptures, publickly read, illustrated, and enforced. Nor is this privilege exclusively theirs. Men of the greatest erudition and leisure may "hear and increase learning."

The lawyer and physician, sometimes, give salutary counsel and assistance to those, who are as well acquainted with the general principles of their respective professions as themselves, and who, in other respects, are much their superiors. Why may not the clergyman do the same? Have his appropriate studies no tendency to qualify him for informing his brethren, however enlightened, whose minds are habitually engrossed by other subjects? Or is that economy of grace, "which the angels desire to look into," so easily fathomed, as to preclude the necessity of application? Far be it from me to magnify the difficulty of knowing "the truth as it is in Jesus." Yet, that clear, extensive, and combining views of christianity should be obtained, without discipline and culture, is utterly inconceivable. In quest of human science, beside the perusal of rudimental books, teachers are employed, and years are spent under their tuition. But what human science embraces so many interesting objects and diversified rela-

tions, as the Christian scheme of redemption ? The method, which its glorious author has prescribed for its illustration, is perfectly analogous to that, in which every other species of knowledge is communicated and acquired. Where then shall we find the person, who is too wise to profit by the regular preaching of the gospel ?

Say, however, if you please, that there are numbers, who "have more understanding than all their teachers." Still the obligation to hear remains in force. For we are, 3. to note, that to divulge new doctrines, and bring "strange things to the ear," is not the chief design of publick teaching. Impressions of piety and virtue may subside, and acknowledged truths fail of their proper influence on the heart and life, through forgetful inattention. To this the learned, as well as the ignorant, are liable. All, who profess and believe the bible, whether they know little or much of its contents, require a friendly monitor to direct their thoughts, and urge their obedience to the plainest injunctions. They may need frequent information ; but they have uninterrupted calls for incitement. Whose theory, however incorrect, is less perfect than his practice ?

Hence, it is an essential branch of ministerial duty to admonish and persuade. "Wherefore," says Peter, "I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth. Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up, by putting you in remembrance." In performing this duty, without supposing the existence, or display of pre-eminent talents, additional illustration may be given to the most familiar subjects; and the weight of motives, already felt and cherished, may be greatly increased. Who does not know that opinions and arguments, to which we are by no means insensible, become more interesting and operative by being presented and viewed in various lights? Besides, a preacher of ordinary genius and acquirements may incidentally suggest thoughts, which have hitherto escaped the notice of the most penetrating hearer, and which naturally lead to a long and useful train of reflexion, or impel to a more diligent and critical examination of the sacred pages. This is a more common and powerful incentive to reading, meditation, and watchfulness, than may be readily imagined. Let any one, in the habit of perusing and pondering the oracles

of heaven, examine the causes, which have facilitated and formed this habit, and he will find the publick ministrations of the gospel among the most effective. These have at once furnished him with materials for devout contemplation, referred him to the only infallible standard of truth and righteousness, and kept alive in his heart that deep sense of divine things, without which a disposition for religious inquiry and improvement could not subsist. Thus the noble Bereans of old, having “ received the word with all readiness of mind, searched the scriptures daily, whether these things were so ; and therefore many of them believed.”

You see then, that every class and description of society may derive personal advantage from the practice for which we contend. But were it otherwise ; were any too learned to be taught, and too virtuous to be edified in this way, it would nevertheless be incumbent upon them, for the sake of others, to sanction an exercise so apparently necessary to the improvement and happiness of mankind in general : And were they to forsake the sanctuary, “ the ways of Zion would mourn, because few came to her solemn feasts ;” and, “ through their

knowledge, weak brethren, for whom Christ died, would perish."

Did people, whose learning, power, or wealth gives them an elevation and influence above their neighbours, realize the incalculable good or evil, which results to the world from their example in this respect; and the consequent responsibility of their stations, they would surely "walk in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless."

II. Having now shown, that there are conclusive reasons for hearing the word, which apply to all the different circumstances and characters of men, let us, secondly, consider the temper of mind, in which this duty is to be performed.

"Wherefore, lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the ingrafted word." "Filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness" stand opposed to the "meekness" here enjoined, and imply the more gross and debasing acts of vice. These have a natural and powerful tendency to darken the understanding, and exclude the rays of divine truth from the heart. We instinctively look with a jealous eye on the men and measures, that counteract our favourite pursuits. This remark is verified in number-

less instances which fall within the compass of every one's observation ; but in none, more visibly than in the treatment, which the gospel and its ministers are known to receive from the openly profane and profligate. Aware that the design of preaching is to rebuke and restrain their wandering steps, and "willing to justify themselves," they embrace every opportunity to depreciate both the office, and those who sustain it. Such is indisputably the origin of that indiscriminate ridicule, which is so often aimed at the clergy, not only in the vulgar haunts of licentiousness, where they are literally made "the song of drunkards ;" but among certain others, who even claim the reputation of science and refinement. It is not the men, but the profession, which excites their rancorous hostility. "The god of this world hath blinded their minds, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of the invisible God, should shine unto them." Whenever, therefore, they consent to hear the word, it is in the exercise of deep rooted prejudice against the lessons it inculcates. They studiously repel every doctrine and precept, which contravene their prevailing conduct. Their first inquiry is not,

“ Cometh this forth from the Lord ? ” But, “ What is its aspect on our habitual temper and manners ? Will it not convict us of absurdity and guilt ? Will it not reduce us to one or the other of these alternatives ; either to suffer disgrace, or to change our course of life ; to pluck out a right eye ; to cut off a right hand ; and to take up our cross ? ”

If so, and so it actually is, self defence impels them to treat both the message and the messenger with neglect, at least, if not with indignation and contempt. They accordingly cherish animosity against all who “ shun not to declare the whole counsel of God ; ” and whenever “ the sins which most easily beset them ” are described and denounced, they take immediate alarm, and not unfrequently complain of personal attacks from the pulpit. If they have too much penetration and prudence thus to publish their own shame, they will, in any event, evade the force of every prescription and command, by which their reformation is attempted. The subterfuges resorted to for this purpose are equally numerous and surprising. Sometimes the veil of pretended ignorance is assumed, and doubts are affected, where even a child would be at no loss : sometimes far-fetched and extravagant

interpretations of scripture are adopted: sometimes a studied indifference and insensibility to moral excellence are displayed: and sometimes a shameless levity, sporting with the most sacred subjects, precludes every serious application to the heart.

Now it will be evident to every capacity, that a character, which necessarily generates such dispositions in the mind, and renders it impervious to the sentiments of religion and virtue, is a fatal obstruction to the meek reception of the "ingrafted word." Reason must be permitted to operate, before revelation can produce its desired effect. The dictates of natural conscience must be respected, before the voice of God will be heard with docility and reverence. A sense of the need, in which we stand of light and direction, and a concern to "know the things which belong to our peace," must, in the order of nature, precede, as well as accompany an acceptable and advantageous attendance on the means of religious instruction. "Keep thy foot, therefore, when thou goest into the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools." Not only "incline thine ear unto wisdom," but "apply thy heart to understanding." Renouncing those vices,

which pervert the judgment and affections, "receive the kingdom of God as a little child."

If we fix our attention on the end proposed in this duty, we cannot be ignorant of the manner, in which it is to be performed. This end is nothing less than our improvement and salvation. Surely, then, it becomes us to "give the most earnest heed to the things we hear, lest at any time we should let them slip." The gospel brings "glad tidings of great joy to all people :" and with what eager attention, with what fervent gratitude, with what reverential awe should they be welcomed to our ears and hearts ! Yet how many, who would be absorbed by an idle tale, in which they had no concern, and from which they could derive no benefit, are alike unmoved and unengaged by the most solemn and interesting communications of heaven ! A listless, drowsy languor appears in their whole deportment ; and "what a weariness is it !" is repeated in every attitude and every gesture ! Others, with a "superfluity of naughtiness," suffer their thoughts and eyes to wander to the ends of the earth, and are "almost in all evil in the midst of the congregation and assembly." At the very moment, when addressed on the all-important subject of their eternal welfare, they

betray a wanton lightness of behaviour, totally inconsistent with every principle, both of piety and good manners. Is this an undue censure of the frequent whispers, and other sportive irregularities, which sometimes disturb and disgrace our holy convocations ? The overtures of reconciliation from God to man are calculated neither to excite, nor to justify mirthful trifling. All who feel their weight will, of course, hearken to their demands with serious gravity. Not only their external deportment, but their hearts, will be in unison with the great design of this benevolent institution. Far from seeking opportunities to object and cavil ; far from transferring the reproofs and expostulations of the gospel from themselves to others, they will listen to them with candour and self application, and make it their uniform endeavour to gain that information and encouragement, which may effectually convince them of their errors, and “ guide them in the way everlasting.”

It is not pretended, that meekness will require or induce you to repose an unlimited confidence in your instructors. “ To the law, and to the testimony : If they speak not according to this word, it is because there is

no light in them." To this test you are bound to bring every sentiment, which claims the sanction of divine authority ; and to " judge for yourselves what is right." Still, however, you may be much assisted by those who " labour among you and admonish you ;" and, very special cases excepted, to forsake their ministrations would be no less injurious to yourselves, than disheartening to them. On this point, the advice of the well known and eminently pious Newton is peculiarly pertinent.* " A stated and regular attendance encourages the minister, affords a good example to the congregation ; and a hearer is more likely to meet with what is suited to his own case from a minister, who knows him, and expects to see him, than he can be from one who is a stranger. Especially be not absent for the sake of gratifying your curiosity ; to hear some new preacher, who, you have perhaps been told, is a very extraordinary man. " As a bird that wandereth from her nest, so is a man that wandereth from his place." Such unsettled hearers seldom thrive. They usually grow wise in their own conceits, have their

* This excellent advice may be seen at large in the works of John Newton, rector of St. Mary, Woolnoth, London. Vol. I. p. 183—195. London edition of 1787.

heads filled with notions, acquire a dry, critical, and censorious spirit, and are more intent upon disputing who is the best preacher, than upon obtaining benefit to themselves from what they hear. If you could find a man, indeed, who had a power in himself of dispensing a blessing to your soul, you might follow him from place to place : But as the blessing is in the Lord's hands, you will be more likely to receive it by waiting where his providence has placed you, and where he has met with you before.

“ As it is our trial to live in a day, wherein so many contentions and winds of strange doctrine abound, you will do well to watch and pray, that you may not have itching ears, inclining you to hearken to novel and singular opinions, and the erroneous sentiments of men of unstable minds. In this way many have been hurt, yea, many have been overthrown. Error is like poison ; the subtilty, quickness, and force of its operation is often amazing. As we pray not to be led into temptation, we should take care not to run into it wilfully. If the Lord has shown you what is right, it is not worth your while to know (if you could know it) how many ways there are of being wrong.

“ Prize the gospel liberty, which sets you free from the doctrines and commandments of men ; but do not abuse it to the purposes of pride and self. There are hearers, who make themselves, and not the scriptures, the standard of their judgment. They attend, not so much to be instructed, as to pass their sentence. To them the pulpit is the bar, at which the minister stands to take his trial ; a bar, at which few escape censure from judges at once so severe and inconsistent. For as these censors are not all of a mind, and perhaps agree in nothing so much, as in the opinion they have of their own wisdom, it has often happened, that, in the course of one and the same sermon, the minister has been condemned as a legalist and an antinomian ! This is a hateful spirit, that breaks in upon the rights of private judgment, and makes a man an offender for a word. I pray God to preserve you from this spirit, which I fear is spreading, and infects us like a pestilence ; and to guide you in all things.”

III. But not to enlarge on the acceptable manner of hearing, let us proceed, thirdly, to remark its tendency to our improvement and salvation.

This head of discourse has been, in a measure anticipated, under the two preceding.

The same observations, which enforce and describe the duty, tend also to prove its salutary influence upon the human character and destiny. We cannot be insensible, that an institution calculated to enlighten, admonish, and excite us, on subjects " pertaining to life and godliness," bears a favourable aspect on our virtue and felicity ; and if attended to, in a meek and docile frame, will contribute much to facilitate the work which is given us to do ; and to qualify us for the favour, protection, and presence of our maker. Independent of a divine promise to support it, this conclusion is rendered probable by the nature of the case. But when we consider the practice, as an appointment of heaven, expressly intended for this purpose ; and are unequivocally informed, that it " is able to save our souls," we no longer rest exclusively on the deductions of reason, but confide in the immutable veracity of Jehovah, and expect, from him, sufficient grace to give energy and success to the means, which his wisdom and goodness have ordained. Whatever indifference or contempt may be expressed by the world, our minds are satisfied with the assurance, that " it hath pleased God by the foolishness of preaching," (should

they even give it that reproachful appellation, "to save them that believe." Admitting the inspiration of scripture, no rational doubt can be entertained upon this topick. "Faith cometh by hearing." Men are "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God which liveth and abideth forever: And this is the word, which by the gospel is preached unto you."

The natural, as well as gracious tendency of evangelical truth, thus ingrafted on the heart is to produce "the fruits of righteousness." It is not hearing in the abstract, but in connexion with its proper effects, which constitutes us "heirs of salvation." To come to the house of God, and "sit before him as his people," is no farther advantageous, than as it serves to stimulate exertions of obedience. "If," says the forecited author,* "if the twelve apostles were again upon earth, and you could hear them all, every week; yet if you were not attentive to the duties of the closet; if you did not allow yourself time for reading, meditation, and prayer; and if you did not likewise conscientiously attend to the concerns of your particular calling, and the discharge of your duties in relative life, I

* Newton, *ut supra*, p. 192.

should be more ready to blame your indiscretion, than to admire your zeal. No publick ordinances can make amends for the neglect of those duties, which, by the appointment and command of God, we owe to society." "Be ye," therefore, "doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves."

To apply the subject, let us, 1. reflect on the privilege we enjoy in the means of religious edification.

Upon this point, hear the words of the great Addison.* "If to inform the understanding and regulate the will, is the most lasting and diffusive benefit, there will not be found so useful and excellent an institution, as that of the christian priesthood. That a numerous order of men should be consecrated to the study of the most sublime and beneficial truths, with a design to propagate them by their discourses and writings ; to inform their fellow creatures of the being and attributes of the Deity ; to possess their minds with the sense of a future state ; and not only to explain the nature of every virtue and moral duty, but likewise to persuade mankind to the practice of them by the most powerful and

* In his "Evidences of the christian religion," p. 181—2. London edition, 1790.

engaging motives, is a thing so excellent and necessary to the well-being of the world, that nobody but a modern free thinker could have the forehead or folly to turn it into ridicule.

“ How would the heart of Socrates or Tully have rejoiced, had they lived in a nation, where the law had made provision for philosophers to read lectures of morality and theology every seventh day, in several thousands of schools erected at the publick charge, throughout the whole country ; at which lectures all ranks and sexes, without distinction, were obliged to be present for their general improvement ? And what wretches would they think those, who should endeavour to defeat the purpose of so divine an institution ? ”

2. We infer the still more aggravated guilt and danger of those, “ who turn away from him that speaketh from heaven. We are ambassadors from Christ,” says the great apostle to the gentiles ; and, “ as though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled unto God.” Whether we consider the interesting nature, or the divine origin of the message, with which christian ministers are charged, it demands the profoundest attention. Shall the dread sovereign of the universe deign to concert mea-

sures, the sole object of which is to aid our progress in piety and virtue, and prepare us for admission to his blissful presence ; and shall we dare to " set at nought his counsel ?" Guard, I intreat you, against a disposition so ungrateful to your heavenly Father, and so injurious to your immortal souls. " Hear now, and attend unto wisdom, lest you mourn at the last, and say, How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof. I have not obeyed the voice of my teachers, nor inclined mine ear to them that instructed me."

3. We are taught the true reason why so many are inattentive and averse to " the ingrafted word." They are " hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." Becoming " vain in their imaginations, their foolish hearts are darkened." The gross veil of impurity and licentiousness overspreads their minds, and excludes that celestial light, which beams forth from " the sun of righteousness," to illumine a benighted world. " Willingly ignorant" of the deformity of their character and the perils of their condition, they " speak peace to themselves, when there is no peace. Woe to them who are thus at ease in Zion !" Many are the obstacles which their own folly

has opposed to their conviction and amendment: Yet, difficult as the task is rendered, unless the fatal charm be broken; unless they rouse from their security, "cease to do evil, and learn to do well," their case is deplorable and hopeless beyond description.

Hence, 4. we are admonished to avoid the least approaches to habitual impiety and vice.

When once you neglect to shape your course by the pole star of holy writ, you know not to what inhospitable regions your feeble bark may be driven. One devious step insensibly paves the way for another, till the habit of transgression is formed, and an unreasonable hostility produced to the terms and means, which infinite wisdom has prescribed for the conversion and happiness of men; till the mild injunctions of heaven are viewed as a grievous burden, and the deluded votary of sin, regardless of the reproofs and expostulations both of God and man, "walks in the way of his heart, and in the sight of his eyes." Accustomed insensibility to the impressions of religion and restraints of conscience destroys the prospect, if not the possibility of salvation. Cherish, therefore, a cordial respect and veneration for christian duties and rites. Contemplate and attend the services of the

sanctuary with meekness and awe. Remember in whose name you are addressed ; and let the importance of the subject solemnize your minds, and give an air of undissembled gravity and devotion to your whole deportment. Convinced of your spiritual wants, and intent on the benevolent end of hearing, "as new born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that you may grow thereby."

5. Let me remit you, in the last place, to "that great salvation," which is both the object and motive of the practice now recommended. Surrounded by temptations and snares, we need every assistance which reason and revelation furnish, to "keep us from falling," and excite us to "run with patience the race set before us. Here we have no continuing city. When a few days are come, we shall go the way, whence we shall not return." Death, however, is not the extinction of our being. We are candidates for eternity, and "must all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ." When that "day of the Lord shall come, in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, the elements melt with fervent heat, and the earth with the works that are therein be burnt up, who shall be able to stand ?"

What saith the judge? " Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doth them, I will liken him to a wise man, who built his house on a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell not; for it was founded on a rock."

“He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.”

SERMON VII.

ON READING THE HOLY SCRIPTURES.

JOHN v. 39.

Search the scriptures.

TO the serious mind it must be alike astonishing and painful to observe the heedless indifference, frequently, I had almost said commonly, betrayed toward "that great salvation, which began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him." Multitudes, who read with avidity the current news of the day, and other publications, which relate exclusively to the affairs of the present world, find neither time nor inclination to inspect "the lively oracles of God." As if religion might be sufficiently understood without inquiry; or were less important in its nature, than earthly pursuits and gratifications, every source of human information, and even amusement is eagerly explored, whilst

those records of grace and truth, which bring “ life and immortality to light,” lie neglected and unimproved. To this origin may be traced no inconsiderable portion of that insensibility to divine things, by which the christian world is too generally characterized and disgraced.

That we may escape this prevalent corruption, and “ know, in this our day, the things that belong to our peace,” let us, under the direction of our Saviour’s injunction, in the text, attend first, to the import ; secondly, to the utility ; and thirdly, to the obligation of searching the scriptures.

I. The language, in which the heavenly teacher has clothed this command, marks, with a precision peculiar to himself, the full extent of the duty in discussion. To “ search the scriptures” is a phrase, which evidently implies something more than a hasty, desultory, or occasional inspection of their inspired contents. It conveys to every mind the idea of attentive, impartial, and frequent perusal ; and inculcates, not only the external act, but the object and motive, by which this act is to be guided.

The scriptures give us a comprehensive view of the divine conduct and purposes, rela-

tive to the improvement and salvation of the human kind ; and furnish a perfect and unerring rule for the government of our faith and practice. Systematick arrangement, however, more especially in the doctrinal and preceptive parts, both of the old and new testaments, is little regarded. With instructive facts, essential truths and duties are interspersed. The same subjects are exhibited in different connexions, and set before us in a variety of lights ; that if overlooked or neglected in one instance, they may seize and absorb the attention in another. Parallel passages variously express the same sentiments, or describe the same events, to give additional force and clearness to one another. The dark and obscure are illustrated by the more perspicuous and lucid ; the bold and figurative by the more plain and simple : and when both are equally intelligible and obvious, each is rendered more impressive by the varied style and phraseology of the other. In connected arguments, many sentences occur, which, unless limited and explained by the scope and design of the writer, will necessarily mislead the judgment, and generate error. Precepts, which now meet our eyes in the indefinite language of metaphor, and seem to exact impossibilities, pres-

ently appear in a more literal dress, and thus qualified, are divested of all the obscurity which surrounded them at first sight, without losing any part of the superior energy, with which they then struck the mind. On this page, we find a sublime description of the promised Messiah; on that, are detailed a series of transactions and facts, which evince its complete accomplishment in its time.

But if we would go on from first principles to the higher attainments of the divine life, a still more extensive knowledge of revealed truth must be sought. To collect, compare, and apply the numerous and weighty lessons which are scattered through the sacred volume; and, by this means, to give them their full effect upon our hearts and lives, diligent attention and research are apparently necessary. Not detached parts only, but the whole must be perused, and re-perused with care. Otherwise, though we may obtain what we know to be commonly possessed in christian countries, a general and indistinct acquaintance with the gracious economy, under which we are placed; yet, for want of more correct and deep impressions of "the truth as it is in Jesus," we shall be constantly liable to "make shipwreck of faith and a good conscience;"

to be seduced from "the way of peace" by the vicious propensities of our own hearts ; and "carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive."

As the best and only effectual security against these dangers, we are required to be much conversant with the scriptures ; attentively to examine, digest, and combine the several parts of the system they contain, and "prove what is that good, acceptable and perfect will of God." For this purpose all partiality and prejudice must be discarded, whilst the "law and the testimony" are uniformly consulted and cordially embraced, as the only infallible guide.

Content not yourselves, therefore, with a partial survey of the exhaustless treasures of wisdom, which are laid open to your view ; but make "the testimonies of the Lord your delight and your counsellors." Appeal to them, in all cases, not only as the highest authority for your religious belief, but as "a lamp to your feet, and a light to your path." Suffer them always to speak their own meaning ; nor let prepossession or vice pervert and obscure it. Engrave on your hearts their

no. 3. *Isaiah 8:10* : *and it shall be*

useful instructions, and often read and contemplate the practical rules which they prescribe for the government of your intentions and actions. Then shall "your eyes be opened to behold wondrous things out of the divine law ;" and whilst your apprehensions of truth are corrected and enlarged, your knowledge and love of duty shall be proportionably increased.

II. This, agreeably to the second division of the subject, calls our attention to the utility of searching the scriptures.

1. One salutary effect of this duty is the production and confirmation of faith in Christ. Its tendency to this effect is particularly specified in the words which succeed and enforce the command to which our thoughts are directed: "Search the scriptures ; for they are they which testify of me." The prophets, under the Jewish dispensation, "at sundry times, and in diverse manners," foretold the advent and ministry of a glorious mediator between God and man. Each, in his turn, delineated some prominent feature of his character. One made mention of his genealogy, another of the time, and another of the place of his birth. This gave a general account of his life and actions ; that descended to partic-

ulars, and brought into view the minute occurrences, which were to mark his earthly pilgrimage. Most of them described the circumstances and ends of his death; and several, at least, predicted his resurrection from the grave, and ascension to heaven.

The exact completion of these prophecies, in the person of our Lord, is clearly demonstrated by the gospel history. It is impossible to compare the one with the other, without perceiving a coincidence, adapted to force conviction upon every candid mind. The artless narrative of the evangelists necessarily remits the attentive reader to the anticipations of those "holy men of old, who spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." Whilst through a series of distant ages, he traces the progressive opening of a plan, early concerted for the redemption of a fallen world, till "the fulness of time was come," and the promised Saviour appeared, he is inspired with grateful wonder, and believes, beyond a doubt, that "this is indeed the Christ."

Beside the evidence derived from this source, "the works, which the Father gave him to finish, bear witness of him, that the Father hath sent him: For no man could do the miracles which he did, except God were

with him." To him, who is habitually conversant with his bible, these miracles, which occur in almost every page of the new testament, afford unequivocal and satisfactory proof of the divine original of the christian scheme. Nor is this all : The intrinsick excellence of the gospel code, the visible harmony of all its doctrines and laws, the unexampled purity of its morals, and the awful solemnity of its sanctions inspire him with the profoundest reverence for its gracious author ; and constrain him to acknowledge, without hesitation or reserve, " that never man spake like this man." Weighed in this balance, the most elevated maxims of pagan philosophy are found essentially wanting ; and the true and only cause of that " pre-eminence in all things," which is peculiar to Jesus of Nazareth, is seen and recognised in the divinity of his mission " to seek and save that which was lost."

2. A distinct and comprehensive knowledge of duty is also to be acquired by searching the scriptures.

On whatever page we fix our eyes, they are met by instructions and commands, which transcend the noblest discoveries of unassisted reason, and fill the mind with exalted conceptions of the improvement and glory, for which

man is formed. These instructions and commands are presented in so many different forms, each imparting illustration and enforcement to others, that the most ordinary capacity can hardly fail of imbibing just sentiments of the nature and design of his being. "The testimonies of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple." Those, who pay but a superficial attention to them, are known to have more correct and consistent views of religion and virtue, than the best informed moralists of the heathen world could boast. Certainly then, they, who not satisfied with the vague and indefinite notions, obtained by a cursory perusal, "give themselves to reading;" and "meditate on these things," will not only "understand more than the ancients," but "grow daily in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." Unlike others, who "err, not knowing the scriptures," they are furnished with adequate rules for the direction of their conduct, in every situation. When tempted to "turn aside to the right hand, or to the left," some appropriate injunction, or example of inspiration recurs to memory, with all the authority of a miraculous voice from heaven, saying, "this is

the way ; walk ye in it. By reason of use, they have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." Their perception of moral excellence is quick and penetrating ; and they seldom hesitate in what manner they ought to choose and act. Not the abstract precept only, but its exemplification, in the detail of numerous transactions, with which it is blended ; and by which its extent, when applied to actual life, is determined, " teach and lead them in a plain path."

3. The same means, by which the understanding is thus enlightened, tend also to sanctify the will and affections ; and to excite a cheerful and unreserved submission to the authority of heaven.

" The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul :" It abounds with the most powerful incentives to piety and virtue ; incentives, which, if duly understood and realized, would rouse the attention of the boldest transgressor, and impel him to " flee from the wrath to come." Thousands, who now " walk in the way of their hearts, and in the sight of their eyes," without " considering that they do evil," might be reclaimed from vice and folly, would they be persuaded to pause, and " search the scriptures." There

they would learn, that “ for all these things God will bring them into judgment ;” that “ he is of purer eye than to behold iniquity ;” and will “ by no means clear the guilty.” There too, to encourage their repentance and amendment, they would meet with “ exceeding great and precious promises” to the returning penitent ; and whilst they traced the progress of others “ from darkness to light,” and explored the history of divine condescension and grace, in the overtures of reconciliation by Jesus Christ, they would discover the propriety and fitness of all his exactions, and be convinced that “ his yoke is easy, and his burden light.”

Such, to say the least, is the frequent result of the process now described. By this process, many in every age of the church, have “ purified their souls,” and been “ born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever.” Every established christian can testify, that for his first impressions of seriousness, he is greatly indebted to his bible, and that by its daily perusal and contemplation, he still continues to derive no inconsiderable part of that information and excitement, by

which he is led to “ walk worthy the vocation wherewith he is called.”

4. To these inestimable advantages, it may be added, that searching the scriptures tends to soothe the mind under the numerous disappointments, sufferings, and sorrows of life.

“ Whatsoever things were written afore-time, were written for our learning, that we, through patience and comfort of the scriptures, might have hope.” Here we are provided with cordials, suited to our condition, and adequate to our support, in the day of calamity ; cordials, abundantly capable of administering relief to the aching heart, and composure to the agitated spirits. The tender mercy of our heavenly Father is displayed, not only in the animating assurances of sufficient grace to those who “ cast their burdens on the Lord,” but in the actual communication of this grace to many of his ancient afflicted servants. Here, moreover, is clearly revealed the benevolent design of divine chastisements ; and here we are taught the practicability of transforming present pain to future pleasure, and momentary grief to immortal joy.

At once consoled and quickened by advertizing to these promises, examples, and counsels, not only the glorious company of mar-

tyrs, but innumerable others, in stations too obscure to be known to fame, have “ rejoiced in tribulation,” and “ reckoned the sufferings of this present time not worthy to be compared with the glory to be revealed in them.” Contrasted to these benefits, how forlorn is the state of those, who, ignorant of the book of God, have no resource in adversity ! Without one cheering word to direct their dubious steps, and enliven their dreary prospects, they fall a hopeless prey to sullen despondency, or passionate repinings !

III. May this contrast prepare our minds to attend, thirdly, to the obligation of searching the scriptures.

The light of nature “ points out an hereafter, and intimates eternity to man.” It has been the prevailing opinion in every period and region of the earth, not only that the soul is to exist beyond the grave, but is there to be rewarded or punished, “ according to the deeds done in the body.” This opinion being once conceded, it follows by fair deduction, that no temporal interest can be of equal moment with the welfare of our immortal part. It therefore becomes a question of the first concern to all, “ what they shall do to be saved ?”

Now the bible professes to solve this inquiry, and to "teach the way of God in truth." In every age of the church, not a few, who were second to none in talent, learning, and virtue, have studied and received it with a reverence, to which nothing short of a special revelation from heaven is entitled. Some respect is undeniably due to their decision and example ; but still more to the inherent importance of the subject. This alone entitles it to a serious, deliberate, and unbiassed examination. I say then,

1. That though we even doubted the veracity of the scriptures, the same prudence, which is commonly practised, and always approved in other cases, would require us thoroughly to investigate their contents, and ascertain the grounds of their claim to our assent and obedience.

In other cases, when any thing is proposed and recommended, as tending to meliorate our condition, though it be the result of mere conjecture, and afford but a slender prospect of the desired effect, we bring it to the test of reason ; and if the principle appear well founded, we scruple not to make experiment of its operation. And is religion only of such trifling consequence, as to be unworthy our atten-

tion ? Is our everlasting happiness so much inferior to the fleeting gratifications of the world, that we may innocently shut our eyes against whatever pretends to give us explicit directions for its attainment ? If not, how can we justify the conduct of those, who reject and condemn the gospel unheard ; who, instead of analyzing its instructions and proofs for themselves, repose a blind confidence in the sophistical representations of its rancorous enemies ? ignorance has sometimes been said to be the mother of devotion ; but the assertion is incorrect : Ignorance is the mother of infidelity. A great part of the boasted philosophers, who affect to despise christianity, are unacquainted with the evidence by which it is supported, and, literally, “ speak evil of things which they understand not.” Were this ignorance unavoidable, it might be excused ; but since it evidently originates in choice, it cannot be guiltless. “ This,” therefore, “ is the condemnation, that light has come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil. For every one that doth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.”

To reason with persons of this description would be labour lost. Their passions, or rather their vices, dictate their creed. With them the primary question is not, "what is truth?" but what is accommodated to their favourite indulgencies and pursuits? Aware, that the word of God requires habitual purity of heart and life, and that the admission of its divine authority would fix upon them the charge of inconsistency and guilt, they are pre-determined to treat it in the same manner, as the ancient Jews did the baptism of John; and, at all hazards, to dispute its descent from heaven!

Were they not actuated by these criminal motives, could they be inattentive and indifferent to that holy book which is offered to their inspection? The blessings it promises are interesting, in the highest degree, to every individual of the human race. What can be more so, than the forgiveness, protection, and presence of Jehovah? "This is a consummation devoutly to be wished;" and wished it must be by every considerate mind, whatever uncertainty may be suspected or felt about the fact. Every considerate mind will, of course, be solicitous to "know of the doctrine, whether it be of God;" Nor will any intensioness of

study be thought too dear a purchase for so necessary a discovery. The bare probability, or even possibility of being assured on what terms salvation may be obtained, would render it our indispensable duty to "search the scriptures daily, whether these things are so?"

This, however, is not the light, in which the subject is beheld by us. We have neither cause nor pretext for unbelief. Few among us have any serious distrust of the truth and divinity of the gospel. The levity, with which it is so often treated by the unreflecting, is generally foreign to the real sentiments of their hearts. In the hour of retirement, especially when solemnized by some awakening event of providence, conscience severely reproves their presumptuous folly, and compels them to feel and acknowledge, that no other "door of hope" is open to mortals. This impression being repeatedly found in the most heedless and vicious minds, there can be no doubt of its existence in others: It is indeed generally professed and claimed.

Hence, 2. The obligation, for which we contend, receives additional enforcement.

We, my brethren, believe the scriptures to be the word, not of man, but of God; ad-

dressed to us, in common with the rest of our species ; and designed to point out the dangers of our condition, and "lead us in the way everlasting." Are we not then bound by every consideration of gratitude, duty, and interest, diligently to "inquire concerning the words of this book ?"

Were the civil power to issue a proclamation, on a compliance with the demands of which our lives, our liberty, or our property depended ; or were an earthly benefactor to bequeath us an estate, on certain conditions to be performed by us, how eager would be our desires, and how indefatigable our endeavours to comprehend the meaning of every part ? But what is a proclamation connected with the fleeting interests, or a bequest of the perishable possessions of time, when put in competition with the "glad tidings of great joy," which the gospel contains ? Can any human lawgiver challenge a degree of deference to be compared to that which we owe to "the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords." Can any human testator have equal claims to our affectionate remembrance, with him, "who is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death for the redemption of transgressions, that were under

the first testament, they that are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance ?" What then is the language of neglecting those messages of grace, which announce " peace on earth and good will to men ?" Is it not virtually saying to the Almighty, " depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways ?" Is it not declaring of that Saviour, who is " exalted to give repentance and remission of sins," " we will not have this man to reign over us ?" " And thinkest thou this, O man," who art thus " willingly ignorant" of a subject, the unspeakable importance of which thy conscience and tongue recognize, " thinkest thou this, that thou shalt escape the righteous judgment of God ? Be not deceived ; God is not mocked : Out of thine own mouth will he judge thee."

To avoid this deplorable doom, let us " set our hearts to all the words," which the volume of holy writ " testifies among us, that we may learn to fear the Lord our God." Allege not the want of time for the purpose. This, however common, is a vain and groundless pretence. For to say nothing of persons in easy circumstances, who have abundant leisure for reading and meditation, and are therefore confessedly without excuse, if they

fail to improve in knowledge and purity, they, who are destined to daily labour, have sufficient opportunities to explore the oracles of heaven. None is so incessantly occupied by business, or perplexed by care, as not to have many intervals of repose, and even amusement. Now, if only a part of these intervals could be devoted to religious study, what a fund of information, relative to the dignity and glory of our nature, might be gained ! What a variety of incentives to piety and virtue might be discovered, and called into action ! Beside these ordinary occasions, which may and ought to be improved, every seventh day is graciously consecrated to the office of " seeking a right way for us and our little ones."

To all this may be added, that the scriptures are written in a style adapted to every capacity. It requires no uncommon intensesness of thought to understand all that is necessary for us to believe and practise. The great, and indeed the only essential, is a sincere desire to know and do the will of God. If with this qualification we open and peruse our bibles, when convenience will permit, we shall find no difficulty in imprinting on our minds those views of the divine character and counsels,

and those rules for the government of ourselves, which constitute the best security of our virtue and happiness. Let us, therefore, venerate the word of truth as the charter of our salvation, and we shall be at no loss for time to inspect its divine institutions, until they become familiar to our minds, and shed a benign influence upon the whole series of our intentions and actions ; till no longer misled by indistinct conceptions of our duty and destination, we are “filled with spiritual understanding,” and become “neither barren, nor unfruitful in knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

SERMON VIII.

ON RELIGIOUS CONVERSATION.

EPHESIANS iv. 29.

Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.

SPEECH holds a distinguished rank among the faculties of our nature. This is the medium of that social intercourse, whence result the most refined and rational pleasures of life. Were we denied the power of communicating our sentiments and wishes to each other ; of dividing our joys and sorrows, in the reciprocation of friendship and sympathy, how cheerless and insipid would be our state ! Alike ignorant of the discoveries and views of those around us, mutual confidence would be banished from the earth ; and many sources of information and comfort, which now illuminate our path, and gladden our hearts, would be inaccessible to mortals.

But the benefits of language are not confined to the present world. It bears an aspect on our future destiny, and is designed, by the benevolent author of our existence, to facilitate the knowledge and practice of the duties incumbent on us, as candidates for eternity. By this means, we are enabled to celebrate the wonders of creation, providence, and redemption ; and to enkindle, both in ourselves and others, that love to God and man, which " is the fulfilling of the law." The sacred writers accordingly insist much on the due government of the tongue. David declares, " I am purposed, that my mouth shall not transgress ; " James asserts, " If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body ; " and, on the same principle, Paul exhorts, " Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers."

Under the article of " corrupt communications," may be comprised, not only that indecent jesting, which pollutes the lips of the licentious, and those blasphemous imprecations, which heighten the depravity of the impious, but all other expressions and phrases, which counteract the holy simplicity of the gospel.

Every thing of this kind is forbidden ; and a style of inoffensive discourse enjoined, tending, while it improves and confirms our own virtue, to conciliate the attention, and excite the activity of others.

The apostle pre-supposes, that conversation has a powerful influence in forming our character ; and, on this ground, urges the importance of making it uniformly subservient to the purposes of religion and morality. A distinct consideration of these two particulars will give us possession of the useful instruction, conveyed in the text, and furnish those directions which, at once, encourage and assist obedience.

I. That conversation has a powerful influence in forming our character, must be apparent to every one, accustomed to observe the operations of his mind, or the progress of his actions. Thoughts, confined to our own bosoms, are seldom uniform and vigorous in their effects ; but when imparted to others, and aided by discussion, they collect astonishing strength, and stimulate correspondent exertions. We consider ourselves bound to support and exemplify principles which we have once espoused, lest we should incur the imputation of absurdity. The act of divulg-

ing them gives us an interest in their reputation and success, to which we should otherwise be strangers. Besides, that which occupies our tongues and receives our applause, in company, naturally engrosses our meditations in retirement; and, thus rendered more familiar and agreeable, we at length feel ourselves no less disposed, than pledged, to conduct ourselves accordingly. At the same time, there is a re-action from the voice of concurrence, which inspires a zeal and alacrity, to be acquired in no other way; and contributes much to establish our opinions, and direct our pursuits. “As iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.” Hence, sentiments, incidentally expressed at first, not unfrequently gain a complete ascendency over the mind, and give complexion to the whole character. It is no longer the impulse of a moment, which gives them utterance: They have imperceptibly conciliated the affections, and, “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth now speaketh.”

The preceding remarks apply indiscriminately to every species of conversation, whether virtuous or vicious. But to be more particular: The person, who gives indulgence to indecent levities of speech, puts his eternal

all at hazard. For a while, he may blush at the allusive filthiness which falls from his lips. Encouraged, however, by the approbation of dissolute companions, he soon mistakes obscenity for wit, and proceeds with increasing effrontery, till, by dwelling on images of impurity, “ even his mind and conscience are defiled ;” and he not only offends every chaste ear by his discourse, but, “ being past feeling, gives himself over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.”

The person, who presumes to trifle with sacred things, though he begins with fear and trembling, gradually loses the restraints of religion, and becomes indifferent and averse to its duties. Nothing, indeed, which we are accustomed to make the subject or instrument of ridicule, can receive the homage of our hearts. Who will be improved by reading or hearing texts of scripture, which he has recently perverted from their original design to the purposes of merriment and witticism ? The ludicrous assemblage of ideas, with which he has dared to blend them, spontaneously recurs to memory, and destroys their salutary effects. “ Becoming vain in his imagination, his foolish heart is darkened.” As if laughter and mirth were the end of his being, and

paramount to the most solemn obligations, both the injunctions of holy writ, and the counsels of pious friendship, are treated with habitual derision ; and neither argument nor persuasion can arrest his serious attention. Alike insensible to the dictates of reason and scripture, he is “ taken captive of the deceiver at his will,” and heedlessly “ treasures up wrath against the day of wrath, and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.”

The person, who adopts the language of impiety and prophaneness, has commenced a career destructive of that veneration for the attributes and authority of Jehovah, which is the fundamental principle of religious obedience, and the only effectual defence against “ presumptuous sins.” Whilst he calls his maker to witness, on every trivial occasion, what security can he give for the truth of his testimony, even in a court of justice ? And should passion or interest prompt, what could preserve him from absolute perjury ? Whilst he unfeelingly imprecates the vengeance of heaven upon all who incur his displeasure, who can safely confide in his humanity ? May not the same disposition, in the indulgence of which he so readily execrates his fellow-men, impel him to deeds of irreparable outrage ?

Certain it is, that he has “ no fear of God before his eyes,” and is, therefore, accessible to every temptation.

The person, who falls into the degrading practice of calumny, necessarily contracts a malignity of temper and manners, equally hostile to the peace of society, and incompatible with that love which “ worketh no ill to his neighbour.” Between taking pleasure in the mortification and disturbance of those around us, and the actual commission of injustice, fraud, and falsehood, there is but a single step ; a step by which thousands have plunged themselves into atrocious guilt, and precluded the prospect, if not the possibility of their amendment and salvation.

From the baneful influence of “ corrupt communication,” let us turn to “ that which is good to the use of edifying.” This, too, yields its appropriate fruits. To regulate our conversation by the gospel of Christ ; and, not only to avoid those abuses of speech, which tend to strengthen the vicious propensities of our nature, but to embrace every favourable opportunity to introduce subjects, calculated to disclose the beauty of a holy life, will greatly assist our progress in the service of God. Even the negative virtue of abstaining from

defiling language, will serve to eradicate defiling imaginations from our hearts. Irregular passions are often inflamed by the agency of the tongue; which, when so employed, is indeed "a fire," as well as "a world of iniquity." Though not extinguished, their lawless rage is abated by silence. If, therefore, refusing so much as to name subjects, adapted to excite criminal emotions in the mind, we "consider one another, to provoke unto love and good works," the unholy flame of sinful desire will subside, and the purest affections be enkindled in our bosoms; affections, productive of continual improvements in piety and virtue. By pleading the cause of truth and righteousness, and endeavouring, "by sound doctrine to convince gainsayers," our own faith will be increased and confirmed. By "reproving the unfruitful works of darkness," and, in no case, "suffering sin upon a brother," our personal integrity will be guarded. We shall be constrained not to "allow ourselves in the thing which we condemn," in others. By taking "sweet counsel together," and dilating with mutual satisfaction, and harmonious agreement, on the wisdom and grace of the christian scheme, with the various obligations it infers, our apprehensions of the divine character and government will be enlarged,

Our gratitude to God and Christ awakened, our perception of duty enlivened, and our attachment to "the things that are excellent" invigorated. By intermingling serious observations with our common discourse, and taking a devout notice of the numerous incidents and objects, which daily offer us moral instruction, an habitual sense of religion will be engraven on our hearts; and we shall be encouraged to act under the prevailing influence of its laws. Thus edified ourselves, we shall contribute, at the same time, to the edification of surrounding brethren: For, to adopt the words of another,* "in whatever we set ourselves to learn" or practise, "partnership, joint advice, mutual incitement, imitation, and emulation, if there be room for it, have unspeakable force."

II. Hence appears, secondly, the great importance of making our conversation uniformly conducive to the purposes of religion and morality.

As a science only, christianity claims profound attention, and may well employ our thoughts and tongues. It discloses a comprehensive, connected system of truth, compared to which, the brightest discoveries of reason and philosophy lose their lustre; and the ordinary themes of

* *Archbishop Secker.*

discourse appear totally insignificant. But when we consider its august design ; the obligations it inculcates, the hopes it inspires, and the glory it brings to light, neither the duty, nor the utility of holding frequent converse on its doctrines and laws can be denied. To " talk of them, when we sit in the house, and when we walk by the way ; when we lie down, and when we rise up," is not only becoming, but necessary to establish our faith, and excite our obedience.

We have already seen, that subjects, which we seldom or never mention to others, soon fall into oblivion. To this origin may be traced a great part of the ignorance and vice, which prevail in the world. Terrified by the apprehension of ridicule from the unreflecting, many are " ashamed of the gospel of Christ," and stifle in silence every serious impression. There are few, perhaps, even among the most profligate, who, at some period of their lives, have not had convictions, the explicit avowal of which might have banished seducers from their presence, and procured them such counsellors, as would have ensured their conversion.

By a criminal deficiency in this respect, even the virtuous too often fail of many improvements and comforts, to which they might otherwise attain. Neglecting the daily interchange of advice,

admonition, and reproof, they become indifferent in their feelings ; their zeal insensibly abates ; and though they may not “ draw back to perdition,” their progress in knowledge and holiness is hardly perceived.

In temporal affairs, we consult our friends, and express our opinions and wishes, without reserve. Nor is our labour lost. We, in most cases, obtain the information, assistance, and encouragement, which we seek. Often are our doubts removed, our fears diminished, our hopes revived, and our industry quickened, in the pursuits of this life, by the cheering voice of friendship. Do we need less support in quest of “ the true riches,” than in prosecution of the transient interests of time ? Or is the welfare of the body more important than the salvation of the soul ? Or have we greater cause to be ashamed of “ that good part, which can never be taken away from us,” than of our regard to the perishable possessions and enjoyments, which earth affords ? If not ; for your consciences have already given a negative answer, why should we neglect the use of means, so visibly calculated to animate and embolden us to “ run with patience the race set before us ?” Were we to speak of spiritual things with the same unaffected freedom and alacrity, with which we confer together on sublunary con-

cerns, not our improvement only, but our pleasure would be perpetually increased by the fellowship of society. Each company would become a school of instruction, and whilst knowledge and virtue were mutually cherished, mutual comfort, hope, and joy would be the happy result.

Under the impression of this truth, it is equally astonishing and painful to observe, with what indifference, and even aversion, religion is commonly treated. In many circles, otherwise full of life and spirit, a serious remark, however naturally interposed, produces an instantaneous gloom upon every countenance, and seals every mouth in the profoundest silence ! With downcast looks of uneasiness, which an immodest insinuation, or a profane expression would hardly occasion, all studiously avoid reply, and wait, with manifest impatience, for a pretext to resume the former topic, or introduce some other, detached from the irksome thought of God and duty ! No sooner is this object gained, than vivacity brightens every face, and unlooses every tongue ! Restored to their accustomed and favourite element, they again unite in the loquacious reciprocation of trifles, and seem to felicitate themselves in their deliverance from the intrusion of reflexions, which bring into view the circumstances and end of their being !

Are such feelings and conduct consistent with the dignity of our reasonable nature ? What more noble employment can be conceived, than to explore the character and will of our heavenly Father ; “ make mention of his loving-kindness, and talk of his wondrous works ?”

Formed for immortality, and destined to a future state of retribution, religion is our highest glory, and ought to be our chief delight. Shall we then cherish aversion to its language, and imagine it unfriendly to our social enjoyment ? Its tendency to purify and exalt the soul, if duly realized, would overcome this criminal aversion, and render us both solicitous and communicative respecting “ the things, which belong to our everlasting peace.” Had we just apprehensions of the prize, for which we are called to contend, we should invariably direct our words, as well as actions to its attainment. Not that we are required to confine our conversation exclusively to religious subjects. “ To every thing there is a season, and a time for every purpose under the heaven.” The business, cares, and interests of this life demand a portion of our attention ; and of these we may innocently converse. Nor are we denied the relaxation, which the harmless excursions of wit, humour, and fancy afford. These, on proper occasions, and within proper limits, may, at once, enliven a social hour, and prepare

us for renewed alertness, activity, and ~~zeal~~, in the service both of God and man. Every thing of the kind, however, must be subordinated to christian principles, and never suffered, either to counteract or preclude remarks, adapted to enlighten the understanding and improve the heart.

Here the directions, with which we proposed to conclude, invite our consideration.

1. The first step toward a conversation, tending to form us to the christian character, is to avoid all profane and indecent language. Surrounded by the gay and thoughtless, we are in frequent danger of falling into levities, inconsistent with that "sound speech, which cannot be condemned." When the spirits are exhilarated by scenes and subjects of mirth, our sympathy may rise to an undue degree, and betray us into those "idle words," which necessarily produce a temporary, if not a permanent disrelish for the sentiments of piety. Where is the person, who has never been thus surprised into transgression? Where is even the true disciple of Christ, who collects no instance, in which, by unguarded compliances of this kind, he has "given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme," and "pierced himself through with many sorrows?"

The most effectual method of escaping these excesses would be, to avoid all intercourse with

the licentious and vain ; a method, which, to the extent of our power, we are bound to adopt. Its complete adoption, however, is impracticable ; " for then we must needs go out of the world." It, therefore, behoves us to resolve with David, of old, to " keep our mouth with a bridle, when the wicked is before us." When placed in situations, where prudence requires us to " hold our peace, even from good," it is especially incumbent on us to redouble our vigilance, lest we be tempted to the utterance of evil. Otherwise, though we may sometimes presume to borrow the style of seriousness, it will be to little purpose. Defiled and disgraced by " corrupt communication," our own hearts will be unsusceptible of virtuous impressions ; and, far from " ministering grace to the hearers," we shall only provoke the imputation of hypocrisy. " If any man among you seem to be religious, and brideth not his tongue, this man's religion is vain." But by a steadfast adherence to the course, recommended in the text, we shall be induced, as opportunities present, to espouse the cause of truth. The influence of our conversation, whether we dilate on the doctrines or precepts of revelation, will be felt both by ourselves and others.

2. A second direction relates to the discreet manner of discharging this obligation.

“ There is a pedantry in religion, as well as in knowledge, into which minds, that are thoroughly enlightened, will not be apt to fall. The affected use of technical terms upon scientifick subjects is generally considered as savouring more vanity than knowledge ; yet some worthy people make it a matter of conscience to interlard their conversation with a sort of technical piety, which, by exciting disgust or ridicule, is productive of the worst effects.” Neither the peculiar phraseology, nor the peculiar tenets of a favourite sect can be introduced, with advantage to the cause of practical christianity, except among inmates of the same communion, whose opinions and views exactly coincide. To others, they “ minister questions, rather than godly edifying ;” and, by irritating the passions, serve to destroy that “ charity which is the bond of perfectness,” and generate mutual distrust, animosity, and censure.

Nearly allied to this error, and often found in the same person, is a disposition to insist much on our personal attainments and prospects. “ True piety affects no unnecessary exposure ; its voice is not heard in the street ; it does not sound a trumpet before it ; the left hand knows not what the right hand doth.”

In the bosom of confidential friendship, to which our sincerity is previously known, we may safely and profitably repose the religious exercises of our own minds ; but to communicate these, without regard to time, place, and company, would be highly improper. In our general commerce with mankind, it should be our principal endeavour to " abstain from all appearance of evil," and to " show, out of a good conversation, our works with meekness of wisdom." The various phenomena of nature, the conduct of divine providence, and the incidents of human life furnish topicks of perpetual instruction and incitement. To avail ourselves of these topicks, and apply them to our mutual edification, is the great object of christian converse. Seldom are we called to long and laboured discussions. Concise remarks, seasonably interposed, are more frequently needful ; better adapted to the freedom of social interview, and more likely to move the heart. " A sudden glance," says the pious Dr. Doddridge, " a sudden glance of thought towards God in the midst of the world, is often a great refreshment to the christian ; and a sudden turn to something serious and spiritual in conversation, is frequently very edifying to others. It strikes the memory and the heart ; and is, perhaps, as a nail fixed in a sure place, when many

a solemn admonition, and many an elaborate sermon is lost."

3. This leads to a third direction, tending to illustrate the extent of christian conversation. We are apt. to confine religion to periods and places, solemnly consecrated to its exercise ; and to consider its duties, as distinct from the ordinary concerns of the world. There are persons, from whom better things might be expected, who seem to imagine it a kind of profanation to intermix serious observations with their common discourse, though, on special occasions, they discover no aversion to them. But can any substitute be offered for that daily sobriety of language, which the gospel requires ? With whatever eloquence or zeal we may sometimes speak for God, if, among those with whom we are most intimately and frequently associated, we neglect to govern our tongues by the law of kindness, and devotion, " we are nothing." Here, our true character unfolds itself ; and, here, our hearts are seen. Here too, or no where, the design of our creation must be answered.

Subjects, which interest our feelings, will, of course, attract our attention ; and though we may not dwell upon them incessantly ; yet when any occurrence or suggestion brings them into view, we are no longer silent ; but speak our senti-

ments and wishes, without reserve. Cherishing a just sense of religion, let us treat it accordingly, and never be “ashamed of Christ and his words before men.”

This duty is enforced by its tendency to our improvement in virtue and holiness ; to which may be added, the more awful motive of a retribution to come. “Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.”

“Seeing we know these things before, what manner of persons ought we to be in all holy conversation and godliness ?” Rejecting every licentious thought and expression, let us, therefore, “exhort one another daily, and so much the more, as we see the day approaching.” Then shall be brought to pass the saying, recorded for our encouragement, “They that feared the Lord spake often one to another ; and the Lord hearkened and heard it : and a book of remembrance was written for them that feared the Lord, and thought on his name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels ; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him.”